

TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE

Emma Copley Eisenberg

New York, New York
Bachelor of Arts, Haverford College, 2009

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in candidacy for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2015

TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE

THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL.....	3
FOUR-PART HARMONY.....	28
IN THE QUIET ZONE.....	46
LONG BEFORE THAT.....	73
DEADHEADING.....	88
HOW TO STAY.....	107
44 TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE.....	122
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	141

I have heard that Georgians are unable to drive in snow, and that Arizonians go bonkers behind the wheel in the rain, but no true-blooded West Virginia boy would ever do less than 120 mph on a straight stretch, because those runs are hard won in a land where road maps resemble a barrel of worms with Saint Vitus' dance.

-- Breece D'J Pancake, *The Salvation of Me*

I must've looked
like what I was, a woman who had lost her
bearings and refused to admit it. It was
another day in my history of posthumous
days, another day when nobody touched my body.

-- Irene McKinney, *Stained*

Both ways is the only way I want it.

-- Maile Meloy

THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL

Liz has a talent for forgetting. For instance, she has forgotten that she rode all the way across America not four, but five times. She has forgotten the state of Idaho entirely, forgotten how once during a snowstorm, she stayed up all night in a bar in Coeur D'Alene with a gaggle of Italian men wearing matching blue jerseys who, when Liz asked what kind of team they were, responded, A team of life.

I've never been to Idaho, Liz tells her daughter Amy.

Here, look, Amy says. Amy has gotten out Liz's old trucking atlas, and is pointing to a red line on it, traced in Liz's hand, that goes straight across the middle of the narrow puzzle-piece shaped state. This says you have, Amy says, and continues flipping through the book by state. She is twenty-six and it has suddenly occurred to her that Liz was once a person who was not her mother. And what's this, here? Amy wants to know, tapping a small red circle, unconnected to any line, that has been drawn around Viney Mountain, a town not even worthy of a dot in the southeastern curve of West Virginia.

I've never been there either, Liz says.

Amy flops the atlas closed and is heading towards the refrigerator. But Liz is certain her eyes have never seen that place. She has not forgotten that. She has not forgotten how, for a few days in 1980, she died there.

Liz gathered her hair into her cap and spat again, trying to get the salty carsick taste of choosing a bad ride out of her mouth. In Barstow, California, she'd chosen a new-looking black Volkswagen sedan containing two chatty newlyweds who said they

were going to the Grand Canyon and could take her as far as Flagstaff, but after the wife insisted on going back for a forgotten curling iron, they had deposited Liz at this dinky filling station in Newberry Springs without so much as a sorry.

You can get a ride from here, right?

Sure, Liz had said. Sure.

It wasn't so much about time as it was about miles. The day before she had been sitting in the sun on her friend's wrought iron balcony in San Francisco grinding coffee when she'd known it was time to move on, and called up Apple, a housemate from her college years in Iowa City. Liz took pride in each ride being worth a certain amount of miles, ideally not less than three hundred, and to end up here, just twenty miles east of where the couple had picked her up, was unacceptable.

Liz sat down on the curb in front of the entrance to the filling station's store. July, but it got cold at night in the desert, and the sweat that had run down the front of her short-sleeved men's undershirt was drying now and making her shiver. She was hungry. Her friend in San Francisco had a hand coffee grinder but no food and they'd spent most of the twenty-eight days Liz was there eating cheese cubes at photography openings on Haight Street. In the abstract sense, Liz had plenty of money, but it was money that she couldn't touch unless a man in a too-tight wool suit in Massachusetts said she could, and even then to get it took advance planning, took phone calls and decision-making about whether to keep Coca-Cola or sell Hammertown Leather Goods, took letting her father know where she was.

I'm tired, Liz thought, noticing that this feeling was happening more and more, a real sluggishness in her, right down to the bone. Her first ride, from a truck stop just

outside Oakland, to Barstow, had been good, 403 miles, but the trucker had gotten snoozy and stopped for a nap. She'd offered to drive for a while, had done it once before for a tractor head without any trailer, for a driver who had added too much gin to his juice outside San Antonio. But this one just thumbed her shoulder and said, Not in this life.

On the curb in Newberry Springs, Liz watched the off ramp from I-40. Her only hope was a sloppy trucker who'd been too lazy or bold to stop in Barstow, and who might realize that this filling station was the last thing before the Mojave, or a car that had meant to go on 15 to Vegas and would stop here to turn around, in which case she could go back west to Barstow and try again. Just then, beyond the illuminated pumps, she saw the glint off a silver tractor, a Freightliner flatbed, clean empty. The truck came to a slow stop, parking in the lot rather than coming to the pumps to fill. The driver hopped down and strode towards where Liz sat on the curb. He was young, maybe eighteen. Liz took her baseball cap off and let her long hair tumble down, then put a hand in her hair at the crown and loosened it a little. The boy looked at Liz the way a younger man looks at an older woman, then went into the store. Liz stood, lifted her pack and walked over to the flatbed.

Hey, said the boy, hoisting up his paper sack of soda and chips against his chest.

You're deadheading, Liz said.

So?

So you're on your own clock. Maybe you want some company. Where are you headed?

Where are *you* headed?

East, said Liz.

Albuquerque, the boy said.

That's East of here.

I don't know. The company says not to.

Liz told him a story, about a man in northern California on a deadhead trip back from dropping off a load of tomatoes, who'd picked up a hitchhiker who he realized had gone on to become Marilyn Monroe.

You a movie star? the boy was smiling a little.

Liz knew she was pretty. She was tall and the men's undershirt showed her tan arms and clavicles. She tossed her hair over her shoulder. The only light in the travel plaza came from the pumps behind her and she thought the boy might see the edges of her hair glowing.

Man, she said to the boy, give me a ride and find out.

As the boy drove, Liz talked through the night. She talked about where she'd been. She told the boy about Old Faithful and Laramie, Wyoming and a strange cement mansion in Kansas that was made to look like a log cabin. The boy said he'd never seen any of those things, but had she hitched on 70 before? The way, if you drive from Hays, Kansas into Denver at sunset, it looks like you're driving straight into the sun? She had, the year before, and got silent at the memory. She was an East Coast kid who had crossed at twenty-four, into the west. It was not a thing that would ever leave her.

Jenny drew back the curtains of Apple's ranch house and looked out the window onto the quiet cul de sac. Liz would come soon and when she did, things would change. Jenny and Apple had been a kind of family, just the two of them in the small house filled

with light and cacti. Then Apple's boyfriend Greg had dumped her, and she had spent three days at home in her scrubs. Then Liz called.

Jenny had left a big public university in upstate New York after a semester. Her apartment was cold and a professor wrote, in the margin of her research paper on President Carter, *this paper is exhaustive and exhausting*. Jenny's older sister came to visit and talked of her old friend from the University of Iowa, a woman named Apple, yes like the fruit, who lived in Sedona and was *an adventure*. Jenny imagined the women who sold silver bracelets at the craft, their arms tan and heavy with turquoise. In the middle of kissing a boy in a dorm bathroom after a Christmas party, she'd caught a glimpse of her acne-splotched face in the wall mirror and thought, simply, *Go*. As 1979 became 1980, Jenny lurched forward on a Trailways bus and watched the state welcome signs fall one after another like cards. Jenny and Apple planted a garden in the back of Apple's house; squash, corn, tomatoes that never came up, lettuce. They watched specials on TV about Helen and Scott Nearing and other couples who had gone back to the land together in Maine and Virginia, about how it was possible not to pay anyone for the things you needed. Jenny got a job at the organic grocery store and at night, Apple opened the doors to the yard and turned on the fans and read out loud to Jenny while Jenny knit and then they switched.

Jenny let the curtain fall and turned to see Apple watering her cacti with a small tin watering can.

No use waiting for Liz like that, Apple said. She just shows up when she wants to. Let me do your hair, Apple said. It's music night.

They sat on the screened-in porch while the sun went down behind the red cliffs. Jenny always wore her hair in one thick brown braid, but she let Apple comb it out, and rebraid it into two French braids. Apple's sandy hair was chopped short and buzzed underneath like a mushroom.

On music nights, Apple's friends, mostly aging hippies who'd retired to Sedona came over to play folk songs. One of Apple's coworkers from the nursing home, a forty-ish man named Otto who played guitar for the house band at the Petrified Forest resort, usually took the lead. Apple played the bongos, the others brought harmonicas or tambourines or more guitars. They played Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary. On these nights, Jenny was happy. She liked to sit in the circle with everyone else, even though she didn't play any instrument.

That night, Otto told the group about how his dad had taught him to play guitar. Jenny's mother was a secretary at an accounting firm in Long Island. She didn't have any hobbies. When she came home from work, before coming into the kitchen, she often sat for five or ten minutes in a big wooden chair in their hallway with her coat and scarf still on.

After they'd drunk cheap red wine from a glass gallon jug and smoked enough weed, Jenny went up to the loft where she slept and looked up through the skylight at the dark Arizona sky. Below her, they sang *I'd ring out Danger! I'd ring out Warning! I'd ring out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land*. Jenny took out her notebook and looked at a pamphlet a friend from Staten Island had sent her about a festival happening that summer near the commune where she lived in West Virginia. The words WELCOME HOME were scrawled across the top of the pamphlet in big orange

block letters, and the people throwing it called themselves the Rainbow Family. The gathering was soon now, only a month away in late June. She was happy with Apple in Sedona, but planting vegetables in a plot behind a suburban house in a cul de sac still felt like pretending. There was a next step.

When Jenny woke up, she heard Apple clearing dishes and beer bottles and then stop. Jenny looked down from the loft and saw a tall woman, blonde hair tied up in a bandana and toting a big blue pack, slide open the glass door. Apple pulled Liz in, her short shoulders notching in under Liz's armpits.

After Liz had showered and put the contents of her backpack and the backpack itself in the wash, the three women drove to Sedona's only all-night diner. Liz slid into the near side of the booth, and Jenny into the far side. To Jenny's surprise, Apple walked the three extra steps and took the seat next to Jenny. Liz drew her arms up and rested them on the top of the vinyl booth as if putting them around two invisible people and slouched down, letting her legs loll apart.

Aren't you scared? Apple said. I can't believe you're still hitching.

It's just people, Liz said. Either they pick you up or they don't.

What's that? Apple said. The drifter's manifesto?

Call it what you want, Liz said, but I called you from San Francisco yesterday and here I am today. 800 miles. Two rides. She toasted Apple with her cup of black coffee.

Well, Apple said. I wouldn't know how. Do you really stick your thumb out?

While they caught up, Jenny studied a middle-aged man in a nearby booth who looked like he might be a trucker. It was nearly two in the morning; he and Liz were the

only people in the place drinking coffee. He was clean-shaven with a stiff blue collar, had big visible pores and a slightly droopy mustache. On the table in front of him was a small transistor radio. He leaned over it, bringing his ear down very close to the radio but not touching it. Jenny's father was the manager of an electronics factory that made radios. She had often tried to ask him questions as he puttered around the house in his socks after work. How many of the fifty states have you been in not including layovers or drive throughs? What (if any) is the difference between a buffalo and a bison? Why does a mandolin have eight strings if it can only make four notes? But her father would just turn on the radio in the living room, press his ear close to it, and say, let's find out.

The women got into Apple's green Cadillac, flat and wide as a boat. The car had come as a bonus gift from Apple's grandmother when she died and left Apple the ranch house, and it was the car, more necessary than the house, that had finally pried Apple away from Iowa City. Apple had been older than most freshmen when she met Liz because she'd already flunked out of a little college near Cedar Rapids. Amphetamines made Apple lose twenty-pounds and were even easier to get in Iowa City than it had been in her suburban town. Liz sometimes got high with her, but she could brush her knees off and go for a run or go to class and forget to snort more for months. Apple could not do a thing half way, and long after Liz and Jenny's sister moved on to start their lives, Apple stayed in Iowa City to attend consciousness raising groups and stay up all night making flyers for a United Farm Workers action. A year ago her grandma had called in an order for a Christmas ham then never picked it up, and when, at the funeral, the lawyer read off that she'd left the house in Sedona to Apple, Apple thought, Sedona, Sedona.

When Apple stepped on the accelerator, the car made a low whining sound. There was not another car on the road, and when Apple turned in at the entrance to the development, every single light was off. Everyone else, Apple thought, every sane person, was at home asleep.

Liz knew how to become the most vital member of any group. Days, she gardened with Jenny or went for hikes alone while Apple was at work. At night, she didn't know how to knit, but she'd close her eyes and listen or stoke the fire. When it was her turn to read, she read better than either Jenny or Apple, deep and steady, she'd been an alto in the choir at her Massachusetts boarding school, and soon Liz did most of the reading aloud.

Several weeks passed. One night, Liz finished a chapter then closed the book.

You two should come hitching with me when I leave, Liz said.

When will you leave? Apple said.

I don't know, Liz said. Soon.

I'll be right back, Jenny said. She went to her loft and got the pamphlet.

I've heard these Rainbow Gatherings are a lot of fun. I've never been to West Virginia, Liz said, unless you count drive throughs.

I don't, Jenny said.

Liz handed the pamphlet to Apple. Could be just what you need, Liz said.

I don't need anything, Apple said. Jenny was the only one who knew that even though Apple had said her days of being an adventure were behind her, on the evenings before she had to work the night shift at the nursing home, she would call up Otto, and he would come over in his green van and trade her amphetamines for cuttings of her cacti.

Apple looked at Jenny. Her hair was in French braids again that Apple had done, though they were mussed and frizzed. Apple had liked playing host to her friend's kid sister, liked watching Jenny paw through her tapes, liked stirring tomato sauce as Jenny played and rewind the same Janis Joplin song again and again or came in raving about how she'd discovered the burrito stand on route 23 where Apple had been buying her breakfast on the way to work for years.

Apple held the pamphlet in her hand and turned it over, reading the back. *May you always be all ways free.*

The next morning, in the sun room, Jenny and Liz studied Liz's trucking atlas. Apple stood at the sink doing dishes, watching them through the pass-through. Liz told Jenny how the odd highways go North-South and the even ones go East-West. She gave Jenny different points of view on the question of to hold a sign or not to hold a sign.

But really, Liz said. Three women, we won't have a problem getting rides.

Apple turned the water off and wiped her hands on her jeans. She got a pack of cigarettes from her hiding place under one of her larger potted cacti, took one out, and leaned over the stove, lighting the cigarette on the front burner.

Shit, Liz said, now it's serious. For someone who's not interested, you sure seem interested.

Even if I was, I could never get the time off from work, Apple said. How long are we talking?

Liz took the cigarette from Apple and took a long drag.

Jenny studied the map. It's just over two thousand miles, said Jenny, from here to where the Gathering will be.

Figure four days to get to West Virginia, just to be on the safe side, said Liz, giving the cigarette back to Apple, a week there, maybe more, four days back for you guys. Three weeks?

Jenny and Liz looked at Apple, who was leaning against the glass door, smoking.

Apple basically liked her job at the nursing home. There was a resident called Tiny who would talk only to her, telling her each day the same story about how he and his brother had built a log cabin with their own two hands and how it was the thing he was most proud of in the world. The other nurses had dark senses of humor too, and when the residents were hateful or spiteful or messy, there was whiskey in paper cones to take the edge off. But there was also the snotty doctor from Tucson who said no no, not like that, do I have to do everything myself? There was also the break room, painted salmon, just a white collapsible table and a sink full of dirty coffee mugs with words like Cisplamin and Actpran printed on them and spoons all with the same one dark drop of coffee pooled in the head. And there was her ex-boyfriend Greg, who'd told her there was no inch of her body that wasn't like divine worship and then asked for his VCR back.

I've never seen the ocean, said Apple. Could we go to the ocean first?

Anywhere, Liz said.

The night before they left, they propped up their packs in the mudroom, three in a line. Jenny's was the biggest, her tent and hiking boots tied on to the pack with extra straps. Apple got drunk on wine and called Greg. While they were in Apple's bedroom, Jenny and Liz sat in the living room by the fire, but Liz didn't feel like reading.

Are you glad to be go back East? Jenny asked.

Not really, Liz said.

How long have you been on the road?

Three years? Three years. It was three years almost to the day, she realized, since she'd driven from Iowa City, college diploma in hand, to Massachusetts General to watch her mother croak of lung cancer, then driven directly back to Iowa City, taken speed with Apple, cleaned out her room, and sold her car, a new silver BMW sedan. It was all that driving that taught her about roads, about traffic, about how to flow with things in motion. It was all that driving by herself at night that made the knowledge that she was twenty-one years old and her mother was dead seem like a thing that could be passed through on her way to somewhere else. On the way to Massachusetts, she had thought, I'm in Illinois and my mother is dying. I'm in Indiana and my mother is dying. I'm in Ohio and my mother is dying. On the way back, she thought, as long as I am in a place I have never been before, it will be like being where my mother is. She took a long way home. I'm in Kentucky and my mother has died. I'm in Missouri and my mother has died. When she reached the edge of Iowa City, and started to pass familiar places—the ShopRite, the brown metal porch of a friend—her skin began to burn. Yes, all that driving alone had been the thing that had lifted the curtain and revealed to her that she could hitchhike.

And you haven't stayed anywhere longer than a month? asked Jenny.

That's right.

And nothing bad has ever happened to you?

Liz smiled. Not from hitching.

I'm thinking, Jenny said, of not coming back here after the Gathering.

Well, Liz said. We've got to do something about the size of your pack.

It was early but already hot as they walked the mile from Apple's house to the shopping plaza where there was the all night diner and gas station. Watch and learn, Liz said, and Apple rolled her eyes but followed Liz to a flat stretch of road with a wide shoulder right before the turn to get on 89 north. Hang back a little. Liz waved her hand for Apple and Jenny to step off the asphalt shoulder and stand in the shade of an Ash tree. No talking unless they talk to you first, no personal details, no telling them where we're headed, keep your pack in your lap, never in the trunk, Liz called, not looking in their direction. Liz held a small cardboard sign that said EAST in big black letters. A maroon Buick slowed and stopped, driven by an older man with hair long as Willie Nelson's. I can take you as far as Williams, the man said. I'm on my way to the capital to work for Carter, Liz said, and the man said, Alright, girl. Thing is, Liz said, hanging her head through the passenger side window now, I'm traveling with my two compadres here, and I promised them we'd stick together. There was Willie Nelson music and conversation about Carter and how the Grand Canyon can cure anything that ails you. Jenny and Apple each cracked a smile. Williams, Arizona. 63 miles.

An hour spent choosing, several passenger cars turned down for insufficient mileage potential. Apple objected to Liz's rejection of two young men going back to school at UNM. Then, Jenny spotted a winner, fifty-something with a Marx brothers mustache, approached while filling. I know it's not company practice, sir, but I'm traveling with my two sisters here, and I promised our mother we'd stick together. They took turns between playing rummy in the sleeper and talking to Henry about his own

daughters, aged fifteen and eighteen, both of whom wanted to grow up to be rodeo stars, though Henry would have preferred them to be teachers. Two stops for peeing and one for the night in Albuquerque. Henry ate McDonalds while the women sat outside and ate dried fruit and nuts. Apple worried that they couldn't trust Henry to not mess with them while sleeping, but Liz argued that the guarantee of being taken to Amarillo in the morning was decisive. Liz took the can of mace out of her pack and slept with it in her sleeping bag, Henry snored and slept in the driver's seat, and Jenny was awake the whole night with the adrenaline of changing her life. In the morning, the west Texas sky cut the world in half. Amarillo, Texas. 641 miles.

Apple insisted on showering at the truck stop. In the mirror, she looked up and saw another woman with short hair. Juliet was traveling with her boyfriend. They really were headed to DC to work for Carter. Names were exchanged all around, a ride to the boyfriend's camp in the Ozarks was offered in the couple's Volvo station wagon. At the camp, Apple and Juliet talked about the hostage crisis, 235 days and counting, Jenny wrote in her journal, and Liz built the fire, log cabin style, her favorite thing. In the morning, everyone was in good spirits. Juliet and the boyfriend let the women out at a Waffle House, then changed their minds and rushed in just in time to order. Hash browns for all. Memphis, Tennessee. 724 miles.

It was raining in Memphis, and the women huddled under the Waffle House awning for several hours, taking turns as the spokeswoman. Liz gave a father and son in a Mercedes a big smile, but in the end, it was Jenny with her braids who reeled in a middle-aged woman in a Chevy minivan. For gosh sakes girls, get in the car, she said, pushing a twelve-pack of toilet paper into the way back. But as soon as they pulled out

of the parking lot, she started craning her neck to look at the stains their boots were making on her floor mats, saying You girls are as bad as my husband and his friends, for shame, and let them out in front of a department store in downtown Florence with instructions to make themselves presentable! Florence, Alabama. 155 miles.

They walked to a gas station on the outskirts of town, Liz spluttering obscenities. Liz was firm, taking the lead on the next ride, Birmingham or bust. If you'll fit, I'll take you, said a big woman in a Dodge king cab pickup. Deb was chatty and Apple told her about the minivan woman's directive and Jenny peed her jeans laughing. Deb turned up her Janis Joplin tape and they took turns doing impressions. Liz won, and when they got to her house, Deb offered Liz her couch in the small house that she shared with her friend, while Apple and Jenny set up the tent in Deb's yard. Liz shrugged at Apple and Jenny's fire to go explore town, but went along when Deb dropped them off at Kelly Park. Apple led the charge to the 16th street Baptist Church, then to a nearby diner where they drank milkshakes while the waitress eyed their boots and greasy hair. There's only white people in here, Apple said loudly, then left a bad tip. Liz gave the couch to Apple who stayed up with Deb and her lady friend to talk about injustice. Jenny and Liz slept next to the tent, under a foggy, moonless sky. Birmingham, Alabama. 117 miles.

They had their pick of truckers to approach at the gas station on the eastbound side of I-20 where Deb dropped them off with a solemn salute. Liz was freshly showered, but no one seemed to want the trouble. They were walking a two-lane access road towards a truck stop when a Trailways bus stopped on the shoulder ahead.

Let me guess, you're runaways, the driver said. He was young, with a thick head of red hair and a navy blue sweater that had a globe insignia across the right breast.

Sure, Liz said.

Southern route was cancelled, the driver said. Wind storm in Mississippi is what I heard. I've got to report to Charleston, South Carolina tomorrow but they don't tell me anything about keeping the bus empty.

Apple and Liz slept until Georgia, but Jenny sat up in the first row of seats to hear how Marshall grew up in Chicago, played minor league baseball.

All those people, they way they cheered though they didn't even know you, he said. But my knee, he said, you get the picture.

I do, Jenny said.

You listen, Marshall said. You're a listener.

I try to be, Jenny said.

You'd be a beautiful mother, Marshall said. Born for it. You know that already though I bet. Do you want to be a mother one day, Jenny?

I don't know, Jenny said.

I do, Apple said, awake for some time now. She sat up in her seat in the second row. Liz moved up to the seats across the aisle from Apple and put her back against the window, stretching out her legs.

How about you Marshall? What's your story? Apple asked.

I was adopted, Marshall said. A foundling actually, left on the doorstep. Only thing I have left from my birth father is this. He took his eyes off the road for a moment and reached into small compartment under his seat and brought out a small caliber pistol. He took it in his right hand and kept his left on the wheel.

I'd let you look at it, he said. But, you know.

Liz half-stood, her pack with the mace was in the seat where she'd been sleeping. Jenny had slid into the window seat. Apple leaned back in her seat, stared straight at the road coming towards them.

Man, I'm hungry, Marshall said. You ladies hungry? His finger was still laced in the gun. Careful, he said, looking at Liz in the rearview. I'm driving this bus, he said. I'll kill us all. I don't care about dying.

Now, he said. The options, the options. What am I in the mood for? He seemed to reflect on this for some time. Then he signaled, and was taking an exit on the outskirts of Charleston. The bus slowed at the bottom of the exit ramp, and Marshall signaled left. To the right Liz saw the bright beacon of a Flying J travel station. Liz straightened, eyeing her pack in the seat where she left it, and making fierce eye contact with Jenny and Apple. Jenny stuffed her notebook and sweatshirt back into her pack and looped her arm through the strap.

Marshall drove to a sandwich shop and threw the bus into park. The front door wiped open and Liz yelled Go go go, and Apple was out, and then Jenny was, missing the last step and falling onto the hot blacktop, and then Liz was too, barely missing Jenny's head with her boot.

Come on, Marshall yelled. I wouldn't have used this gun on you girls. Just wanted you to know I had it.

But they were already running. They ran back towards the interstate and kept running toward the lights of the Flying J.

When they got to a small patch of grass just in front of it, Apple threw herself down onto it, and Liz got down on her knees next to her. Jenny stayed standing, chest heaving.

Apple, Liz said.

Fuck. Apple breathed in and covered her eyes with the heel of her palms. You. Liz looked up at Jenny.

I'm not having fun anymore, Apple said.

Jenny felt she had turned a corner and walked into a room where she didn't belong. A private dressing room maybe, where pretty girls were dressing. Why should Apple should look to Liz to be comforted? How many things about Apple did Liz know that Jenny would never know? Jenny breathed these questions out, and they were gone. Jenny turned back towards the interstate and watched the container trucks and flatbeds exiting and pulling in to the truck stop for dinner time.

We can catch a ride easily from here, Jenny said.

I'm not getting in any truck, Apple said.

Of course not, Liz said. Apple lay her head back down in the grass, lolled it from side to side. Jenny slipped off one strap, then the other, let her pack fall to the ground then sat on top of it. She began taking out her braids, and running her fingers through her long, thick hair which was kinked where the braids had been.

Jesus, Jenny said. The options, the options, she said.

Apple looked straight up at the sky, bit at a smile. What am I in the mood for? she parroted back.

And the two of them laughed, first nervously from their chests, then bigger from their bellies, Apple turning over onto her front, and Jenny taking off her pack and sitting on it, then landing splayed next to Apple. As Liz looked on, they laughed like that for a long time, their foreheads resting in the dirt.

Jenny looked at herself in a mirror at the Flying J. Crazy people happened, could happen at any time, but they had acted fast, without words. She felt fancy. She braided her hair in the French style like Apple had taught her, in Apple's honor. She took her journal from her pocket and wrote something her father had said once, after listening to a radio special that moved him to tears. We are led to the stories we are meant to tell. Charleston, South Carolina. 445 miles.

Let's just get in the next car that will take us, said Liz. Three college students, two boys and a girl in a Pathfinder who had stopped for road snacks.

They're only kids, Liz said to Apple.

Fine, Apple said. We've come this far.

Jenny and Liz rode in the hatchback. Folly Beach, South Carolina. 12 miles.

Jenny watched Apple's face as they walked the boardwalk and then the sand path through the scrub grass to the ocean. How would it have been different, to be from a landlocked place? thought Jenny.

How would it have been different to be from a place where you could see the ocean? thought Apple.

I'm in South Carolina, thought Liz, and my mother will always be dead.

For three days, they ate king crab and camped on the beach. They pooled the money they had left and bought peanut butter and bread in the local supermarket, wearing only their bathing suits, because Liz had said towels took up too much room in their packs.

On the third night, Jenny got out the trucking atlas.

We could stay here, Liz said. I wouldn't mind it.

Has the queen of adventure finally had enough? Apple said.

No, Liz said. It's just, the staying's good, so why go? We have everything we need here. The gathering is people trying to pull together what we've already got.

And what's that? Apple wanted to know.

Peace, Liz said. She wrung her hair out and began to comb it with a wide-tooth comb.

No way, Apple said. You drag me here, we nearly get shot. She picked up a piece of broken shell from the sand. No way, Apple said again.

Jenny had her big kneecaps dug into the sand. After a time, she spoke. This is the life I wanted, she said.

Uh oh, Apple said. She turned to Liz. Look what we've done, Apple said, and threw the shell back into the sand.

What Liz wanted to say but did not say that day on the beach was, I'm so tired. What she wanted to say was, I have a feeling, a brand new feeling, and it has lodged itself somewhere inside my sternum, but I don't know what it means yet. She carried the feeling as she packed up their camp, burying their food scraps in the sand, and she carried

the feeling through North Carolina as they rode with a trucker whose AC was broken and who quoted scripture the whole way, Jenny staying in the front seat the whole ride because she didn't mind the old stories, and she carried the feeling into Virginia when the trucker finally pulled off for fuel just outside Richmond.

After Jenny and Apple had turned off their headlamps, Liz was still awake in the dark tent. She listened to the sounds of trucks idling, of truckers shouting to one another in the nearby lot. Too hot to sleep, one said. Then don't, said another. Liz willed herself to want to go to West Virginia. When she saw first light, she unzipped the tent and stared at the rows of trucks and then across the parking plaza to the truck stop. She walked past the sleeping trucks, their dumb heads and silver pipes like antennae, their lights lit her way. One honked as she passed, and in the clear blast, she felt the weight of Jenny and Apple's bodies lift off her shoulders. She felt the sweet hard clarity of being alone return to her, her every choice once again belonged only to her, every moment was once again hers to possess and retell as it might suit her. She heard her feet hit the blacktop first one and then the other, and the clean simple sound of her two feet, plucked from the shuffle of the six she'd been listening to for the past week, triggered such a sense of joy, such a primal song of relief, that tears formed in a thin membrane over her eyes but did not fall.

In the truck stop store, Liz bought a pack of cigarettes. She smoked one down, then lit another and smoked it down too. She found a payphone and called her mother in Massachusetts, but it was her father who answered of course.

Daddy, she said.

Christ, he said.

She told him where she was, and he was silent a long time. Then he said, I'm getting married on Wednesday. Third time's the charm. I didn't know where to send your invitation.

What day is it today? Liz asked.

It's Friday.

Liz leaned her back into the glass of the phone booth and looked out at the early morning traffic. Just a mile from here was I-64, where she could go West over the Blue Ridge mountains into West Virginia. Or, she could go East, to 95 and catch a ride north. My father, she thought, who I care for not at all.

Liz could imagine the woman her father was marrying if she was anything like the ones he'd dated since her mother died. The new wife would be thin and stylish. She'd wear red Givenchy heels and hold the reception at the Four Seasons in Boston. She'd look over her bowl-sized wine glass at Liz and ask the question they all asked sooner or later. Aren't you scared, out there, on the road all by yourself? Jenny was the only one who never had.

Over a back-to-school sendoff dinner the August after her freshman year of college, her mother had asked a different question.

His name, his name, Liz said. Lucas, she said, and sipped her wine. She'd spent the whole summer talking about him, a boy from Montana who hadn't turned out to matter.

Elizabeth, her mother had said finally. Don't you know, when to say when?

I'll call you back, Liz said, to her father on the phone, and hung up.

Liz walked back to the tent and looked at Apple and Jenny, still asleep. Jenny slept with her knees clutched tightly to her chest, Apple lay on her stomach, arms limp at her sides. It occurred to Liz that she could not protect these two people. Despite her big pack, Liz knew, Jenny was the smarter and less vulnerable. It occurred to Liz that of the two of them, Jenny would be the one who would be ready to die for the idea of being a free person. While Apple would run to and fro, begging to get back into life at any cost, Jenny would know better. She knew that in a few minutes they would wake and stretch their arms above their heads, their minds electrically clear, their bodies ready; in a few minutes they would wake and head West to a place where people who called themselves Rainbows, who called themselves a family, would gather in the forest and she was supposed to go with them.

Liz was having her hair sculpted into a half poof by a Four Seasons Hotel stylist when she was summoned to the lobby for a call.

West Virginia state police, the smartly-dressed receptionist said, expressionless, handing Liz the receiver, then placing the phone's base on the marble countertop.

Elizabeth? a man's voice said, breathless, panting. Liz listened to the static in the connection, to the distance of wire the voice was traveling.

Yes?

Elizabeth Brundage?

Yes.

You're alive?

Yes?

You're alive?

Liz blinked. She put her hand in the crown of her hair, but it felt stiff and unattached to her.

Don't you read the paper? the voice asked. We've been looking everywhere for your body. We were told there were three of you girls traveling. We've been calling you the third Rainbow girl.

The detective told Liz what they knew. Jenny had been shot while on her knees, execution style, Apple while turned away, in the back, both at such close range that they had gunpowder burns on their faces and hands. They were found side by side by two local men in a remote field on the top of Viney Mountain in the early evening.

One hour later, the detective said, and it would have been dark. No one would have ever seen then.

Liz thanked him and handed the phone back to the receptionist. She went back to the salon and finished having her hair done. She took the elevator up to the eighth floor where she put on a one-shouldered grey crepe de chine dress. So lucky you fit into the sample size! her future stepmother congratulated her. She stood, on carpeted steps, between the two other bridesmaids, in matching grey dresses. There was an arch made of white lilies and hydrangeas and her father stood under it with a priest, his head hanging down like it was broken. The crowd stood, and her father raised his head, then turned to Liz as if to say her name. He stood stiffly as Liz's future stepmother walked towards them. There was the smell of wet greenery. Liz's father held onto the woman's white-gloved fingertips.

We kneel, the priest said, for the body of Christ.

Liz got down on her knees. She was aware of the space behind her eyes, of the great distance between her eyes and her brain. She was aware of how light the Boston sky still was, how grey.

It was this fact, that it was still light out when Jenny and Apple died, that did it for her. How could that be? To be shot in the forest when it was not even dark, Liz would think. How little those shots must have mattered to whoever fired them, how sure the shooter must have been that he was safe, what easy targets they must have made, like pretty, dumb deer. What a joke these two women must have seemed, with their big backpacks and sport sandals and maps. What a joke! Liz almost laughed.

But it was still light out! she would think, every time she washed dishes or hiked alone or drove fast in a car. For years, the feeling, which had been new before but was no longer, of unwillingness, a dread-sized rock of no, would descend to clobber and re-clobber Liz, standing in the cereal aisle and trying to choose which box, or when a man would brush too slowly against her in the subway. Sometimes the clobbering was real, and sometimes it wasn't, Liz would come to know. She met a man at a folk club in Portsmouth, she stared at a clear plastic test tube in the bathroom of the vegetarian restaurant where she worked and waited for a clobbering that never came. The man got a job in San Jose and Liz found work at a travel agency there. Liz told her daughter Amy stories as she bathed her in the sink of their apartment. The sink was big and the color of jadeite and Amy slapped Liz's face lightly with her wet fingers as Liz sang the words like a song. We go to the mountain, we go to the stream, we go to the stand that sells ice cream. Do you dream about frogs, do you dream about toads, do you dream about girls who walk on the roads?

FOUR-PART HARMONY

It was the summer the price of gas got so high that McCall's station hoisted a vinyl apology sign that read WE HEAR YOU. Lowriders and sedans, wagons and trucks, were all left to rust in turnarounds and peel in ditches. For the first time in Viney town history, just because a person's car was somewhere no longer meant they were.

But Kendra Mikesell would remember that summer for other reasons. For instance, how her mom trained Rowdy the Palomino in the round pen behind their house, and how from her bedroom, Kendra's soundtrack all that summer was the beat of Rowdy's lead hoof in the dirt then the other three coming quick behind *step* step step step, *step* step step step, the syncopation of her mom's voice weaving between, speaking to the horse, saying Go on, go on, go on.

Also, that was the first summer Kendra worked at the state park restaurant, serving cokes and chicken sandwiches to the tourists who came to Seneca County to camp and fish. Band practice for the Buckley Family Bluegrass Band was Tuesdays, and every week as Kendra drove home from the park, she eyed the four cars that were parked in the mouth of the Buckley Homeplace. Kendra had been tailing the band to every pig roast and wedding and music festival for a solid year since she graduated high school, fortuitously appearing between sets with a big smile and fresh beers. Then in June, when RC Buckley crashed his car on Viney Mountain, killing a man from Bruffey's Creek, totaling his red station wagon, and breaking his right wrist, his spot as the banjo player suddenly opened up. At the Campbells' anniversary party on Cordova Road, the band's second set ended and Kendra made her play.

But you're not family, Don Buckley told her. That's kind of the whole point.

Wherever Don went that summer, so went boys wearing Brown University hoodies who held camcorders and talked of a documentary which would be called *Don Buckley: Paterfamilias of West Virginia Bluegrass*. Two of them lurked now, behind a rhododendron bush.

But if I was, Kendra said.

But you're not, Don said.

But if I could play. If I could really play. What then?

That's nothing to me, Don said. That's everyone we know.

The music had happened on a small platform in the clearing behind the Campbells' solar-powered house, and Kendra watched from the grass as the band left the stage. First Don Buckley with his mandolin dangling from his neck by a heavy cord, then second son Jesse Buckley who was dragging his upright bass by the tennis ball stuck on the end of its tail spike, then a substitute from the northern part of the county on banjo. For now. Only nephew Drew Daniels on rhythm guitar turned his sunburned neck and looked at Kendra before stepping off the platform.

Mr. Ansel's bus, the number three, picked Drew Daniels and his twin sister Carla up first, then swung around Cordova Road to Kendra's house; the Buckley brothers were last. Once, in order to compel Don Buckley to pay a pool debt, Mr. Ansel had sped past the Buckley mailbox without stopping to pick Jesse and RC up. Kendra was sitting with Carla Daniels who was already asleep, her head on a plastic-covered library book. When the bus rolled by RC and Jesse Buckley standing in the road, Drew Daniels ran to the

front of the bus and yelled, but Mr. Ansel said nothing, just honked the horn jauntily. Kendra turned and watched out the smudged plexiglass as Jesse ran after the bus, swearing and kicking gravel at its tires. He was a skinny kid who had mellowed and silenced with weed and high school. She watched RC's face, which was fuller than Jesse's and framed by the turned up collar of his wool sailor coat and still did not believe. He was still ready to board the bus, his hand was still taut on the strap of his backpack, his knee still partly bent and raised. Kendra kned the bus seat, turning so she could keep watching RC as the bus drove away, his hand on his backpack strap finally going slack as he considered, maybe for the first time, what else a kid might do with a day.

Several weeks after the Campbells' anniversary party, on Kendra's drive home from the restaurant, Drew Daniels stood in the ditch in front of the Buckley Homeplace, checking the mailbox. Drew looked at Kendra through the glass as her truck approached, then stuck out the Seneca County Times, in its clear blue sleeve and waved it up and down like he was bossing airplanes.

Kendra pulled over onto the gravel shoulder underneath a rhododendron bush. It had rained then stopped, and water dripped from the waxy leaves onto the slope of her car door and then onto her arm when Kendra cranked her window down.

You have your banjo in there? Drew wanted to know, jutting his chin towards the cab of the truck.

Of course, Kendra said. She lifted up the black hard case with gold buckles as proof.

Good, Drew said. Our sub canceled. Come and play, he said. If you still want to.

It is said that at one point, there were seventeen joints in Viney where a person could sit and buy a beer. The Buckley Homeplace had been around since long before that, and it bore the bootstamps of both Confederate and Union soldiers: the war had split Viney in half, one brother in grey, one in blue. It was white, two stories, board and batten, wide pane windows in hot-cross-bun fours. The living room of the Homeplace, which faced the two-lane blacktop, had once been the Viney Post Office, so it had an extra door, one to the kitchen, one to the field in front of the Homeplace which sloped steeply down towards a ditch. Behind the house were woods, and the shallow Three Forks River.

What's this? Don said when Kendra came through the front storm door. Jesse Buckley sat at the kitchen table, and as usual, squinted at Kendra through eyes he was incapable of opening wider than dental floss. Don's girlfriend Terry stood by the sink, rinsing cups.

Look who I found, Drew said.

You don't shake easily, Don said.

True, said Kendra.

Don took one of the tails of his red Hawaiian printed shirt and rubbed it over the top of his open can of beer, as if wiping away dust.

Well, you're here, he said; and then a pause. What's your drink? We've got too much in this house for three, anyway.

Don slung his mandolin over his shoulder, called a song about a cheating girlfriend, all sad minor chords, then played the kickoff. Kendra was with him after that. Drew tapped his foot to get the beat, then jumped in for the second line. By the cold woodstove off to the side, Jesse had gotten his bass out of its soft case, but was still squinting at Don's fingers. When the bass came in, the song punched Kendra in the gut. She had forgotten how necessary was a bass's low double beat, but there it was again. It lay underneath the rest of the notes, more rope than string, more vibration than sound. Kendra felt Don watching her right hand as it picked out the melody in three-note rolls, so she concentrated on staying tight on beat, nothing fancy, this was Don's show and she was still auditioning. Don kicked his leg out for the last time around, and then a quick double strum and the song was over.

Don took a sip of his beer and eyed Kendra, nodding slowly as he drank. He called another and then a third, sang the first verse, *thinking of you, feeling so blue, wondering how I ever left you behind*, then the chorus *how mountain girls can love* then Don threw his chin at Kendra and called, Banjo!

Kendra started off easy, a standard lick, an easy slide into a pinch, that again, keeping it classic and classy, Don hated the showy stuff, but then she couldn't help taking it up the neck, and when she got there she couldn't help but push the notes hard, couldn't help but feel the song's swoop down, the lean in, the way it was breaking open against her metal finger picks, and then she was bringing it back down the neck, just trying to finish it off without messing up, and she did, her face flooding with hot blood, and Don was nodding, and she called, Guitar! passing it off to Drew, who started right in, his wide square fingers moving over the bluesy runs while the rest of them just kept the beat.

They took a break for everyone to get refills on drinks.

Your hair is beautiful, Terry said, touching Kendra's long brown ponytail.

Terry's hair was dark and dyed, curly and to her shoulders. She carried most of her weight around her middle. Kendra watched Terry arrange pepper jelly and cream cheese crackers in concentric circles on a plate and did not offer to help.

You sing? Don said, ambling up to the kitchen table and raising his glasses to the top of his head.

Sure, Kendra said.

Harmonize?

I don't know. I can try.

She sat down on the couch next to her rum and coke.

You'll sing better standing up, Don said. Kendra stood.

Again, Don called, as they got to the end of the final chorus each time, Again, and then eventually they stopped pausing and just did the song on endless loop. They were all singing, even Jesse, though he was already too stoned to carry much tune, when Don looked at Kendra and said, Just Kendra. I just want to hear Kendra.

There was Kendra's voice, hanging alone. She sang from her stomach and let what was true in the song leak out, and Don bobbed slightly in his knees to keep her on beat, and his body told her to slow down just the slightest bit, and she did, looking him in the eye then, and he nodded and she sang, and sang it again, and then again.

Hey Kendra, Don said. Have I ever told you the one about how RC stole all the furniture from the Homeplace?

Nope, Kendra said, though he had, the Tuesday before.

One time I came home, after riding bikes. Don paused, smiling. OK, I was hammered, he said, and then a pause; Don waited for laughs, but the only one who did was Terry.

So I stumble in, Don said, I'm looking for a place to pass out. I put my hand out for the kitchen table. To demonstrate, Don put his hand out into the space of the living room.

No kitchen table, Don said. So I lurch into the living room, heading for the couch. There wasn't a stick of wood in the whole goddamn downstairs, Don said. That's a true story.

In the month that Kendra had been practicing with the band, she had also heard the one about how RC stole all the money from Grandma Norma's frog-shaped cookie jar and the one about how one time, when his girlfriend had kicked him out of the house, RC hid in the woodshed of the Homeplace for a week. But the one that really got Kendra was the one about how RC was so allergic to cotton balls that Don had taped them all over the locked roll top desk in their river cabin and put Terry's jewelry and the titles to the Buckley cars inside it.

But where did he go? Kendra asked. Where is he now?

Don shrugged. He'll come back. He always does.

What if he doesn't? Jesse said suddenly from behind his bass. What will we do then?

The air shifted, it was late in the night. Jesse and Don looked at each other and took up their instruments. They jumped right into a song without calling it, a song only they knew. Kendra and Drew sat on the pink couch and did not look at each other.

When Kendra slept over at the Daniels' house on those Friday nights in the tenth grade, after she'd learned a new song on the banjo and Carla had read the better part of a biography on Jay Rockefeller and then she'd turned Carla over on her back and gripped her around the stomach, Kendra sometimes lay naked in Carla's bed and listened to Drew Daniels humming through the wall. He hummed loud and well and late into the night, the bar of light often still coming from under his door even when the first light woke Kendra up to pee. He had a microscope in his room and was always finding things to look at more closely: the connective webbing on a dead chicken's foot, swiss cheese, leaves.

During the year she'd tailed the Buckley Band, Kendra had gone to Carla Daniels' wedding to Randy the Cop, but only because the Buckley band was playing it. Don raised his glass to his niece and her lifetime of happiness, and Carla wore a dress that was too big for her and boots that laced up.

Thank you so much for coming, Randy the Cop said, taking Kendra's hand in both of his moist palms. Carla Daniels said nothing, but kissed Kendra on the cheek with the corner of her lipsticked mouth. The wedding was in the afternoon at the State Park and when Kendra went to dump melted cooler ice over a cliff she found the triangular tip of a lizard's tale, the flesh gel-like where it had been snapped from the rest of the lizard.

Have at, she said, tossing it at Drew where he sat eating a white Jordan almond.

On the third of July, Drew Daniels came into the restaurant and sat at the counter.

Sweet tea please, he said. I was in the area. He sat and stirred his shaved ice chips with a jumbo straw. He kept asking Kendra to use the phone, kept dialing the Homeplace and hanging up like Russian roulette.

What's with you? Kendra said.

Big party for the fourth, Drew said. All the family who's gone is coming back in for it, and fireworkd Don drove all the way to Tennessee to get. Maybe Carla will come.

Oh? Kendra said.

Drew stirred his tea. Also, RC's back, he said.

Since when?

Drew shrugged. Turns out he was never really gone.

The next day, Kendra's mom was working Rowdy the Palomino in the round pen. Kendra rested her chin on the top rung of one of the metal gates that made up the pen. No one was allowed in when Mom was training a horse, but Kendra's sister Faith kept testing, sticking first an arm then a leg into the ring. She wore jean shorts and Kendra could see how tan and muscled Faith's little girl legs had gotten while she hadn't been looking. The wind picked up. It was going to storm.

Drop me at McCall's on your way back into town? Faith asked. I need some electrical tape. The light in the barn's busted and it's not the bulb. I tried messing with the fuses. Nada. And Dad called to say happy Fourth.

From where?

A phone booth.

Rowdy the Palomino let out a low whine.

I'd like to call someone from a phone booth some day, said Faith.

Kendra's mom stopped speaking, and there was *step* step step step; and a pause; *step* step step step, and then Rowdy the Palomino turned and walked over to the fence where Kendra and Faith were speaking. He laid a hoof on the rung of metal below Kendra's chin and shook his head and sighed. There were flies everywhere on his eyes.

Kendra and her father once dug a ditch together. Kendra was thirteen and the lower pasture wasn't draining right. They worked until the palms of their hands were yellow with pus blisters, then sat on the embankment. He taught Kendra a way of playing the banjo without hardly moving her hand so the blisters wouldn't burst. Kendra's father plays a gentler, strummier banjo than the kind Don Buckley taught his son RC. Kendra's father favors picking the second and third strings together, like walking down stairs. He has a tattoo of a banjo on his back, the neck of which goes all the way down his spine, the head of the instrument round on his lower back.

Good thing you're a man, Kendra's mom, who did the bills at Dr. Hilling's office, was fond of telling him. It's like a bullseye for where they'd put the epidural in.

When Kendra got into her truck to head to the Homeplace party, Faith was waiting for her in the passenger seat, her knees mashed against the dashboard.

You'll have to re-dig that ditch it looks like, Faith said as they drove down the driveway. When they got to the gate, Faith jumped out to open it. She held the green metal gate, shielding her eyes from the sun, as Kendra pulled the truck through to the lip

of the road. Faith stood there for a beat too long, looking at the tailgate. Then she seemed to remember something, closed the gate, latched it and got back in the truck.

Let's pretend we're going somewhere together, said Faith.

Where? Kendra asked, pulling out onto the blacktop.

Goodbye, said Faith, waving to the boys sitting at the turnoff for the Presbyterian church.

Faith said goodbye to the old beer joint where Kendra and she had busted out windowpanes with their elbows, easy as spun sugar, to see if it would hurt. Faith said goodbye to the yellow house where Carla lived now with Randy the Cop. With mountains on both sides of the road, Kendra stomped on the pedal. She pulled the truck into McCall's.

Goodbye, Faith said, slamming the thin metal of the door behind her.

When Kendra got to the Homeplace, Drew's black truck was there, but he wasn't. The gravel was full of cars, and the sloping field too.

Good, Don said. You're here.

They played. There were cousins on fiddle and melody guitar, and the usual Buckley hangers on. The out-of-town cousins had wives and little kids that they'd brought, and the kids danced to the music, their arms were up and flailing. Between songs, the kids came up to Jesse's upright bass and pulled on its ropes. One little boy kicked it to see if it was hollow.

It is, Jesse said.

When the family migrated into the kitchen for chips and dip, Kendra heard a rap on the old post office living room door. It was Drew.

Your Mom's a nurse? Drew said.

Sort of, Kendra said.

She followed Drew across the flat field, walking around the bonfire to the woodshed which sat tucked into the treeline. Around its back, and there was RC, sitting up against the shed in the dirt. The blood in his face had settled since his crash. It looked like the inside of an old peach, red purple, and stringy, where blood was and wasn't. His right arm was still in a cast, which was split open and its gauzy stuffing was spilling out, and also blood.

I found him at the bar, Drew said, lobbying Missy to give him a scissors and when she wouldn't, he went nuts.

Not exactly, RC said. That's not exactly so.

Can you help? Drew turned to Kendra. They stood face to face in the cool night, the sound of katydids full in Kendra's ears. Drew's blond hair came to just past his chin and he pushed it back behind his ear now with the fingers of one hand, like a girl. She had once jumpstarted his truck with her own and let him sit inside her warm cab while they ran the engine.

He needs a hospital, Kendra said.

Yum, RC said.

No, Drew said. No hospitals. They'll just give him more pills.

RC raised the cast and began to whack it against the wood pile. Ow, he said.

Kendra took off her long-sleeved button-up and knelt next to RC. She wiped up what blood she could, then tied the sleeves around the gap in the cast.

When Carla comes, Drew said, Randy the Cop will come too.

We can't have that, RC said. Now can we? No we cannot.

Drew looked at Kendra's work and watched RC's arm for a long beat.

Go keep an eye out for them then, Kendra said. We're ok.

Thanks, Drew said, and disappeared into the trees.

Music began outside, by the bonfire. Mandolin, bass, guitar, fiddle. RC let his right arm go slack in Kendra's lap. He raised his left hand in the air and made imaginary chords with his fingers, playing along.

Do you know my girl Amber? RC said.

No, Kendra said.

Then you don't know, RC said. You don't know how beautiful she is. You don't know anything.

Maybe not, Kendra said.

Amber said we're up against a wall, RC said.

What do you mean, a wall? Kendra wanted to know.

Look to the right it's a mountain, RC said. Look to the left it's a mountain.

You women are like that, aren't you? said RC. You go into your secret room and you shut the door. Then one day, you're just gone.

And there was a pheeww sound like a gun popping and then a comet of fire rising. It rose in a fighting wiggle of electricity against the black sky and, with no warning, burst open with a tearing sound and made a spider of light. The kids screamed then, loud and

all together. It was red. It was terrific. The spider sparkled and for a minute, tried to stay. It clutched the sky and held on.

Come here, said RC. He lay down, slowly, breathing out in pain, Kendra's shirt on his cast sliding against the grass until he settled himself on his back and looked up. You can see them better this way, he said. Kendra lay down too and looked up. They lay side-by-side, RC's good left arm lightly touching her elbow. Contact. Someone's hand touching her body. Kendra remembered it.

The fireworks came faster, gold and blue and green and pink and silver. Some crashed into each other and the crash multiplied them. Some were lines and then the lines birthed new explosions. Every time one launched there was the pheeeww sound and then the burst of light wobbling up and then the boom of the explosion and the shriek of the kids. They came even faster then, BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM SHRIEK SHRIEK SHRIEK SHRIEK. It sounded like the kids were running.

Then it was the finale. A firework was launched, pheeeww, and it was gold and it became three gold spiders in the sky that fell into the hills. Where do sparks go when they land? Where does all that fire go? The kids were just shrieking straight through now. There wasn't any part of the sky Kendra could see that wasn't full of light. It was as if whoever was running this show, Don probably, had just lit a match to whatever was left. Just let the whole mother fucking sky burn.

The party applauded, the smoke from the sky was still falling, and then, there was Don, hands in the pockets of his indigo denim, thin canvas sneakers soft through the grass.

RC sat up. We missed you, RC said. We've talked about everything. We've talked about Amber.

Don took off his Mountaineers baseball cap and put it to his heart. He smoothed the wavy grey hair that was underneath, then replaced the hat.

It's time for you to go now, Don said.

Kendra got to her knees. Still, she was not family. But here she was.

Go where? RC said.

Don smiled with his mouth only. Anywhere, Don said, but Seneca County.

No no no, RC said. He brushed the grass from his back with his good hand.

I suggest Florida, Don said. I suggest Arizona. A nice mid size city maybe, where there's work and a green park and food you've never tried.

Ha, RC said.

Get out, Don said. He took his hat off again. It was a new hat, and Don looked at the tag still on it, the C of plastic and the price hanging down from the middle nub. Don pulled and the plastic and paper came away in his hand. I'm not asking, Don said.

Dad, RC said. Daddy, he said.

The sound of the party rose. Someone had picked up a guitar and was thumping the lowest string with their thumb.

Come on, Don said, offering Kendra his hand. Let's go back and play.

They walked towards the music.

You can come back, Don called into the dark air, stopping once they cleared the tree line. Come back, he said. But not for a long time.

There is a photograph that hangs on the wall of the Homeplace above the old Coke dispenser that Don uses for extra beer storage. The round white plastic slots are made for bottles, but Don jams the cans in anyway. The photograph is of RC and the Father of Bluegrass, Bill Monroe, the caption reads, *RC and The Father, Indiana, 1980*. The night must have been dark, the flash must have been on, because what the picture shows, mainly, is white. The off-white of the Father's hat, the white of his collar and dress shirt front and cuffs, the bunched up white of the turtleneck that toddler RC is wearing, the blinded white of the Styrofoam cup that sits on the table in front of them. The Father, in a brown double-breasted suit with a wide pinstripe, more dignified than the burgundy the Father has made his Bluegrass Boys wear, who stand left and right, the Father holds toddler RC, blonder than blonde, on his lap. The pink of the Father's old man jowls, the pink of RC's fat three year-old cheek, the pink of his mouth about to cry out, the pink of his tiny hand, extra pink at the fingertips, the hand in the shape of a claw, reaching out to something just outside the frame. If you knew, if you heard Don tell the story of how they drove all night to Indiana in a '58 Apache, how they stood all day in the sun in a crowd with people from Vermont and New York and California, how RC's mom, Don's ex-wife now, crumpled over in the heat and had to be carried to the medic's tent but how Don took RC into his arms and went anyway, leaving her in the tent with strangers, the Father signing autographs for hours and how Don waited and waited in line, shifting RC from hip to hip like a mother, and how when it was finally his turn with the Father, Don thrust RC into the Father's arms, but RC, being tired and hungry and not liking the way the Father's polyester suit felt in his fist, cried and fought will full body

force to get off the lap of the Father; since Kendra knew all this, she also knew that it was Don that RC is reaching for in the photograph, the shutter snapping just as RC opens his mouth to shriek, that the bit of light-blue hat brim and stub of nose and droop of patterned shirt collar are Don's, where he squats just outside the frame. What had Bill played that night? and how had he made the Bluegrass Boys move out of the way so he could sing on cue without saying a word and did he hit every high note and how? Kendra could have asked Don every time she was at the Homeplace and Don would have answered, she could still ask next week when she goes, but somehow Kendra has never asked, somehow she knows, that on that day for once, music was not the point.

Don pulled out a plastic lawn chair for Kendra and she sat in the circle of bodies around the fire. It was getting colder and the fire was blazing. Across the fire, Drew Daniels had his guitar at his feet.

Where's Carla? Kendra wanted to know.

She never showed, Drew said. He rubbed his knees with his hands like they were sore, and poured his drink down the hatch. Drew Daniels, Kendra wanted to say. Drew Daniels, look at me.

Careful Don, Drew said. Don was still on his feet, lurching around the circle, his pant legs dangerously close to the flames. Don leaned down then and kissed Terry where she sat beneath him in her plastic lawn chair. She was so short that she had to tip her face way up to kiss him back. They were kissing so slow, the slowest kind of kiss, every bit of skin touching and pulling away.

That's love, one of the cousins said. You don't see much love like that.

Terry laughed and patted Don's cheek, but he kept his forehead on her forehead.

Drew picked up his guitar. Alright, Drew said. Go on.

And they played. Don and Drew sang, and Jesse sang too. Jesse sang loud, louder than Kendra had ever heard his voice. They sang a three-part harmony. *Everybody I met*, sang Jesse, *everybody I met*, sang Drew, *everybody I met*, sang Don, his feet planted on the ground but his body swaying everywhere with the liquor, *seemed to be a rank stranger. I found they were all, I found they were all, I found they were all, rank strangers to me.* Their voices were related.

Mid-song, Don stopped playing and lurched over to Kendra. He knelt in the grass. Sing, Kendra, he said. You know the words.

So Kendra sings. She sings though Don is not her father, though she has no brothers and no cousins. She sings until she knows what the song means, until wishing for a thing to be different than it is, is no longer something worth burning over, and then until it comes back around, and is again.

The last note of the song is ringing out. It's over, but no one has said anything yet. Kendra can't imagine what could possibly come next that would ever be as good as this. And then she knows what will. It will be a song, any other song at all. She'll be playing it for years.

IN THE QUIET ZONE

The winter after I graduated college, there rose up in me the desire to drop so hard out of the world that I could hear my life trying to get in touch. Call it nostalgia, call it paranoia, call it what you do when you have been learning about too many things that scare you and you want to do the opposite all at once. Wireless technology, otherwise known as radio; we are taught it is only the transmission of intelligent information by the laws of physics, an ordinary scientific process which we put to work for human progress and over which we have precise control. But we don't. As my boyfriend Adam and I cooked soup together on Sundays, we read things from the paper out loud to each other. A television station in Dallas switches to digital broadcast and wireless heart monitors at Baylor Hospital stop working. A two-way baby radio in a house three miles from the Luton airport blocks air traffic control, and instead of landing instructions, incoming pilots hear a child screaming. In other words, all communication between two objects not physically touching became suspect.

Take cell phones. People were getting tumors, living in rooms lined with tinfoil. Adam was working at the Planetarium, but he got bored watching the same ominously-voiced-over videos about the Big Bang and liked to text, *What are you doing?* every twenty minutes. Then one day when I held my phone to reply, I saw the air around my wrist ripple. If I pressed the button, whatever was making my phone air ripple would make Adam's phone air ripple too. It seemed kinder not to reply. I started leaving my phone at home in my underwear drawer in the one-room sublet that Adam and I shared in East Harlem, and there it stayed. Riding the subway on my way to my job shelving books at the Lion Library, I was the only one in the car whose eyes looked straight ahead.

Soon, I was only listening to music that came out of instruments in front of my face. On Thursdays the bar on our corner had a live band, and I went no matter what. I've never been picky that way.

What kind of band is this? Adam would want to know.

Adam would have preferred to take the train to Brooklyn and see boys in brown leather hook-and-eye boots. He was raised by teachers in the Midwest and liked to carry the bag and have seen the movie; when we went to Shabbat dinner at the apartment in Battery Park City where I was raised, the jumbo-sized red wine glass my mom would put in his hand did something powerful to his face every time.

Adam stood in the back of the bar, but I crammed up front against the speakers. The noise was too much; I could not stand it, but if I stood it, the feeling in the song broke and expanded and kept on expanding. When my glass was empty I'd head to the bar, get a beer and a shot, make a friend, then get persuaded to go outside and smoke.

I called you and called you, Adam would say when he found me, holding up his shiny black screen as proof. The next day I'd be up early, Adam already out for a run—neither rain nor snow nor dark of night nor hungover girlfriend would deter him from his training regimen—my memory like flash then static. Had I bogarted the jukebox to play the bar every Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song in order of radio debut? A strongly-worded argument with a man in a Phillies hat flashed up. Had I thrown up into Adam's bike basket? I had a vague association between my face and wire mesh.

During my lunch breaks, I used one of the wired desktop computers at the library to look at pictures of graduate schools. Kids I knew from college clicked away in glass office buildings in San Francisco and DC, and their messages popped up on my screen.

Laura! they read. *Fiancée! Cul de sac. Company loyalty.*

What were these words? They were nothing to me.

I saw the flyer—old school, with torn nubbins of paper you could rip off—on the Planetarium cork board while waiting for Adam one afternoon. *Interference Specialist—Protect the future of the Mountaineer Telescope*, the nubbins said, and then a number. It tugged a yarn of memory. I dug up Adam's textbook from underneath our bed. Adam had kept going with Astronomy past the intro course where we met and written his honors thesis arguing for the true existence of blackbodies: objects in space that perfectly absorb all the radiation they receive and reflect nothing back.

He'd doodled on the page, spilled something brown on the glossy photo. *The Mountaineer Telescope*, said the caption, *the world's largest fully-steerable radio telescope, southern West Virginia*. The Telescope, I read, was able to pick up even the faintest signals from the farthest reaches of the universe, cosmic background radiation, energy left over from the Big Bang. The government had made rules to protect the expensive dish from human interference, establishing The Quiet Zone: ten thousand square feet of airspace through which nothing could be communicated except ancient, unchangeable information. I closed the book. I could get behind ancient, I could get behind faint.

Just after New Years, I packed some trash bags of clothes and Adam's textbook, into the Shapiro family Volvo, an old, black, stick shift sedan. A city kid who'd learned to drive that little car around the long blocks by the West Side Highway at twenty, I was

a bad driver, sitting up too straight and leaning in too close to the wheel, white-knuckling it when the trucks passed me in whooshes of air and shaking axles. But I made it to Viney, West Virginia, by nightfall, a two-stoplight town that sits on the flat floor of the Cranberry Valley, where I had rented a room. This was not coal country, but rather on the edge of a national forest where people came to camp and fish and ski.

The following day was a grey Tuesday. To get to the Observatory from town, I took the main drag across the river where it became a two-lane blacktop and drove the seven miles of switchbacks that were cut into the hills that enclosed the valley. I rolled my window down, and the slush from the road that flew into the hairs of my arms smelled of Fraser fir. A school bus was parked in the backyard of a neat single-wide trailer, a gravel plant poured a thick stream of pebbles from a chute two stories high, a thin piece of green tractor rose over a fence like a llama's neck. No one I'd grown up with had ever seen these things or would likely ever see them. No one knew where I was.

When I crested the first mountain, the road flattened out and the sky opened up. I drove through the unincorporated village of Viney Mountain; to my right, corn and hay fields, a frozen cow pond, a white house with busted out windows; to my left, across the wide valley floor, the Allegheny mountains rose, layers of hills on mountains on sky. The Telescope was taller than anything else in the valley by a mile, and stood out bright white against the winter-grey mountains like a giant-sized satellite dish stuck on top of a construction crane. From some primordial instinct, I understood what this straight stretch required of me. I floored the gas. The pleasure that happened then—wind, road, mountains, speed, silence—was physical. My cells pulsed, my capillaries flushed, my airways dilated; some long-held fist in the region of my sternum unclenched.

There weren't cell phone towers anywhere in Seneca County but the Observatory's rule was no device that generated radiation of any kind could be switched on within two miles of the Telescope. Signs showing fingers pressing the oversized OFF buttons of cell phones, laptops, walkie talkies and police scanners rose on both sides of the paved access road, and at a small booth, I was told to park my car in the Outer Lot.

On account of the spark plugs, the attendant told me, as he drove me into the inner sanctum in a 1970s-era pickup with a hole where the radio would have been.

Timmons, the Observatory's Assistant Director, met me in front of the squat cinderblock building. He was bleached as a paper doll, white-blond hair, light jeans with loops for hammers on both thighs, and a grey sport coat. After shaking my hand, he turned and pulled open the heavy metal door. I imagined he was often followed by a brood of blonde children in descending size order. The Observatory had been Viney High School before the schools were consolidated in 1980 and all the kids were bussed forty miles farther out, Timmons told me as we walked down the long linoleum hallway.

Not that it matters to me, he said. My wife home-schools our kids.

Timmons showed me how the microwave in the staff cafeteria was kept in a shielded cage and pressed a finger deep into the special wave-absorbing padding of the auditorium walls.

But despite all this, Timmons said, people are always doing things that compromise our work. Just last week our receptionist received a musical greeting card and ruined six months of data on stellar gases. It's your job to keep those incidents to an absolute minimum, Timmons said.

Got it, I said. A one-woman radiation police force.

Timmons did not laugh. Laura, he said. You must understand the meaning of what it is we do here. Every day we fight against the onslaught of the cell phone companies, the ski resort. Retention has been a challenge. You said on the phone you are passionate. But you must also commit to the work.

I've committed, I said.

It wasn't work I'd ever done before, but the concepts were straight from my Computer Science and Physics classes, and I'd volunteered building houses every spring break. In the morning I might drive up to the ski resort and walk out to their farthest cabin and run a signal propagation model to see if their new security system would affect the Telescope. Climb, measure, test, re-test, lift, move, try, try again. In the afternoon I might go to lectures the Observatory offered to its staff about upcoming projects of study, or stand over Timmons' shoulder in his office while he sat at his computer and monitored the eye of the Telescope. That, or sledgehammer the base of a power-line to re-jigger its insulation. I liked the way my jeans fit over long underwear, liked being high up and looking down at the Cranberry Valley, liked how every mountain had its own name: Briery, Black, Rainey. I watched as the snow shrank from their tops. I touched mushrooms thin as pages and electric blue crawdads lying surprised and blinking in a stand of white pine.

Every night after work, I passed back through Viney Mountain and often stopped at McCall's store to buy beer where it was cheaper than at the Mini Mart in town. Men in camo boots sat outside on a bench by the ice machine, eyeing the pickups that clanked side by side near the gas pumps, passenger talking to driver. Back then, it was more

important to me that I be pretty. My hair was still long and wavy and hung down my back. The men in the pickups watched me walk. Then, I thought it was because I really was pretty, but now I know it was only because I was a girl and new in town and not too fat, and that almost never happened there.

I drove a lot, but I had no trust. If the road climbed and then dropped off, I slowed to a stop. I rode the brake hard around the switchbacks. I can't see, I said to the silence in my car as I drove the dark road back to Viney. Trucks with orange beads of light mounted above their windshields flashed their high beams in my rearview me. I felt the tension of those miles as knots in my shoulder when I reached into a kitchen cabinet for a can of beans, a crick in my neck when I turned onto my belly to sleep.

I was renting the upstairs back bedroom of a house that belonged to Sam, a math teacher at the middle school. It was strange to rent a place to live there, most people under thirty were either married or gone. Sam was divorced and my room had belonged to her daughter who was away at the state university in Morgantown. Sam was small and thin and did her own highlights with a wooden instrument that looked like a miniature rake while standing in front of the mirror in the upstairs bathroom we shared. The house was a brick two-story down the street from an aluminum warehouse that stood empty all year unless it rained during Heritage Days and the music was moved indoors.

A red neon M rose from the all-night mini mart advertising Marathon gas, and from the window of my bedroom, where I sat reading from my Adam's textbook, it was the only thing I could see lit up in the whole valley. I thought about calling Adam on Sam's landline, but a sluggishness came over me. In the end, Adam had been out running one morning when he got clipped by a car and called my parents.

Enough, my mom said in the elevator. The silver walls were redolent of a microwave. I felt cooked.

Later, I sat by Adam's feet in too-big socks the hospital had given him.

You got lucky, I said, pinching the extra bit of sock.

No, he said, I didn't.

I held his foot in my hand and said I would do everything. I really would apply to graduate school. I would drink only ginger ale.

Will you grow up? Will you charge your phone and also answer it? Adam said.

Not that, I said.

Years after all this, I saw Adam on the news. He had been awarded a major prize, and was being interviewed on a flat surface, white and windy as the moon. His tie kept flagellating his back.

It's been a great ride, he said. I was just a kid when we started.

He wore glasses and a dark coat and had just the right amount of beard scruff. He was in a word, desirable, yet I felt no desire for him. I could have tied myself to Adam forever, we had not come close to exhausting what was good there. But I did the other thing instead.

One morning in March, Timmons called me into his office. He wore a flat-brimmed cloth baseball cap over his washed-out, sleepless face.

Broadband interference, he said. From somewhere in the valley. We can't lose this pulsar, it has the longest period ever recorded—eight seconds.

A pulsar?

A massive star which has collapsed under its own gravity, Timmons said. It spins and emits a beam of radiation, but to a stationary observer like the Telescope, the beam seems to turn on, then off, then on again, in regular intervals.

I must have made a dumb face.

It's like a light house, Laura, Timmons said. A lighthouse in the sky.

I loaded up a receiver, amp, spectrum analyzer and directional antenna, and spent the morning pulling over onto the shoulder and scanning the spectrum reader, driving in different directions and triangulating between my location and the Telescope, then adjusting my course. By late afternoon, I was driving down a side road on Viney Mountain. The reader was really spiking now, and the only human structure on that stretch of road was a small white clapboard house.

I stood at the storm door and knocked. There was the sound of drums and electric guitar. It was loud, it was live.

Yes? said the boy who answered. He was solid, in jeans and a pullover sweater, his dark brown hair thick but buzzed down. I was used to people looking at me, but he didn't.

I explained.

He led me through a heavy curtain over the doorway and into the living room which was much warmer. Another young man with blond hair to his shoulders shook my hand, and a third man slumped forward in an easy chair by the television, watching the five o'clock news. His face was very thin, narrower than a paperback, and white; his facial hair came in patches down his jaw, ending in a wispy puff off his chin. He wore a

navy and gold baseball cap and a navy windbreaker that tented out over his chest. His eyes were closed. He smiled and bobbed his head. In his hand, he held a red and white beer, a brand called Old Milwaukee which I would come to know well. His fingers did not straighten out all the way, but were bent under at the first joint.

The boy who had answered the door, his name was RC, stood in the corner by a drum kit and two amps. An electric guitar leaned against the windowsill.

This your house? I said.

My brother Jesse lives here, RC said, and threw his head towards the man with the funny hands.

We met, Jesse said. The other day, at the Observatory. That's where I work.

The men moved chairs so I could get to the outlets more easily. After fifteen minutes, I found the culprit—one of the amp cables was badly cracked.

Not enough to shock you, I said. But enough to give off a signal.

Thank God you got here in time, RC said. The men laughed, and I wished then that I were not a woman.

I'm sorry, I said, and turned to go.

Hey, RC said. Stay for a beer?

When I said I would, Jesse got up and moved past me into the kitchen. His jeans were too big; they folded in at the knees, and his belt cinched their top band like a drawstring. But he was tall, over six foot. He came back with three beers, nestled into the crook of his elbows, and handed me one. I didn't know how he could see with his eyes like that, he seemed to be squinting at the inside of his eyelids. But there was something kind and comforting about him. I sat on the couch next to Jesse as the men

talked to each other, and asked me no questions. RC opened the back door and rolled a bali shag cigarette. He looked at me as he ran a hand over his scalp, then looked away.

Let's play, RC said. He got up and sat in the drum kit, and the blonde got up and slung the guitar across his shoulder.

What about you? I asked Jesse. You don't play?

Jesse is a purist, RC said, smiling. His teeth were white as bathroom tile. Jesse doesn't play electric, RC said. He won't even touch a computer.

Well, Jesse said. I touched one once. But I didn't like it.

Twenty minutes in RC's red four-wheel drive station wagon, and we were at Viney's only bar, which sat slightly east of town. It had a glowing arrow sign and a big gravel lot, and the inside was all heavy blonde wood. At the bar, RC put his elbow up against my elbow. It was warm and alive. He ordered me a drink and put it in my hand, and then went off to talk to a leathery-tan woman in jean shorts who was collecting money from a group of men by the pool table.

Hey Dental Floss! the woman called, and Jesse raised a hand.

Why did she call you that?

My eyes, he said. Everyone calls me that.

We drank our beers and then Jesse put another in my hand and then another. Jesse and the blonde and I were by the bar, Jesse and the blonde and RC and I were in RC's car again, leaning around the switchbacks, the high beams of passing cars filling the windshield, the blonde was passing a joint back to Jesse and me, then Jesse's face stubble was against my face, Jesse's small lips opened, he breathed.

Later that night, Jesse and I had sex on an inflatable mattress in the attic but my lights were out. I remember Jesse trying to stand but not being able to because the ceiling of the attic was sloped. But that might have been earlier, just after we got back, when I followed a pillow Jesse was holding up the steep stairs. I remember pulling the covers over my head and being in the bed alone, and the back of Jesse's head as he went back down the stairs.

Books tell me that the brain, soaking in that much alcohol, simply stops making memories—click, off. But that doesn't explain where I went.

When my lights came back on, Jesse and I were on our own pillows. He'd put sheets on the mattress. I was naked and on my back like I never sleep. I looked down at our bodies. My big breasts hung down and away from each other. Next to my tan thigh, Jesse's thigh was as wide as a wine bottle and the color of raw chicken. The room was airless, but bright. A cowboy hat hung from a hook on the wall.

After a while, Jesse sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees like a girl.

It's a pretty day outside, he said.

It is.

Sunny.

Yes.

You really grew up in New York City? Jesse said. But where did you play?

The hallway of my apartment building had carpet, I said. We played there. You?

Oh wherever, Jesse said. I liked this valley between two hills near Bruffey's Creek. We snowboarded on own homemade half-pipe.

I could have done any number of things. Hey, I could have said, I don't know what we just did or how or if I am OK. I could have gotten in my car and gone back to Sam's and steered clear of Jesse and RC from then on.

But I didn't. I sat there in the bed as Jesse got dressed and went downstairs to make coffee, and I was still in the bed when he came back with two pale yellow mugs of coffee and put one of them in my hand.

I started going over to Jesse's house most nights after work. He'd fix me a drink and then we'd sit on his pink rattan couch and talk about nothing in particular. He wanted to know what my apartment looked like and what we learned in my Philosophy classes, and I asked him about what it was like to grow up on Viney Mountain, and what insulation is like to install.

Itchy, he said.

When I was sufficiently drunk, I'd look straight at him. He knew how to take a bra off, but needed both hands to do it. I made sure all the lights were off. With Adam, the only other person I'd been with, there had been a lot of looking, a lot of poking his face and asking, Are you the person that is going to matter? but with Jesse I did not ask that question because I knew the answer was no. Jesse said things to me in bed, things I'd never heard before, *that's right you bitch*, and other sharper things, but they rang hollow in his mouth; words he'd heard in movies maybe and thought it was necessary to say. Maybe it was because I felt he couldn't really see me through his eyes, and I like not to be seen, but I, the me that was sexual, kept inflating like a balloon. I discovered that after coming once, if I didn't push Jesse away even though it felt squirmy like I could not

stand it, if I stood it, it would hurt, and then it would become something else, a door would swing open, whoosh, into a great open space, and I could pop the balloon entirely.

I don't remember Jesse's face. The memory is blocked, or I've blocked it, or his eyes were always closed and eyes, as they say, are the window to the soul. I don't remember him making many faces—happy, sad, angry. He laughed, I feel sure, when I made a joke. I don't remember holding Jesse's hand. He had a red four-wheel drive station wagon exactly like RC's, and in it, he could reverse a snowy fifty-foot driveway without looking, but he was afraid to drive on the interstate or switch lanes, preferring to stay in the left hand lane and make cars pass him on the right.

I saw him write his name, the date, the distance between the walls of his living room in feet and inches. Once in bed, I pointed to my book.

What does this say?

Shit, he laughed and turned away. This isn't school, he said.

But he was generous. Most days he brought a sandwich to my office for lunch, and often he helped me load and unload my gear.

I like to be helpful, he said.

The purpose of radio signaling is to carry some piece of intelligent information. A steady stream of power at a constant frequency counts as a radio transmission, but does not carry any intelligence. To carry intelligence, some part of the signal has to change. This is called modulation. Black bodies, Adam taught me, give off radiation that, when picked up by a receiver, makes a sound like rushing wind. This is called white noise.

It went this way for a while. I'd go to Jesse's at night, then drive back to Sam's in the morning to shower and change. When I got upstairs, Sam was often on her way into the shower. She wore a short red robe with big sleeves made of a silky fabric that folded back to show her neck under her ponytail. She was forty or so, but had compact, taut legs like a college soccer player. She wasn't awake yet, so things were plainer on her face. Jesse was her nephew by marriage as it turned out, because in Viney no person could ever fill just one space in your life. She liked me. Her face those mornings as she went into the bathroom said, Check yourself, said, This is not the way you want to go, my friend, but then she'd come out of the shower smiling, and put the coffee pot on.

One night, Sam was sitting on a bar stool on her porch smoking Marlboro Reds underneath a sign nailed to one of the wooden pillars that had a parrot saying, It's five o'clock somewhere! She made me a plate of sweet potatoes and pork and we ate as the sky went dark. Her drink was Maker's Mark bourbon, and she pried away the red wax seal around a new bottle and poured me two fingers over ice in a small rounded glass. She lit a cigarette and then another and handed me one.

I like having you around, she said.

I like being around, I said.

Jesse likes you.

I know, I said.

Man, she said. That's a first. She laughed, and I did too a little.

No one else?

Not so far, Sam said. She breathed a cone of smoke and brushed off her thighs. Let me break it down for you, she said. Last season, RC shot a buck, but he'd already

gotten his two, so he told Jesse to go to McCall's to check it in, you know, pretend that Jesse had shot the deer himself so they could keep it. But Andrew McCall sent Jesse right back out. RC had to pour some of the buck's blood onto Jesse's hands and shirt just to get McCall to let Jesse check in the goddamned deer.

He thought Jesse was too gentle to kill?

More like he didn't believe Jesse could do anything, Sam said. People think Jesse is out of it, maybe not quite all there. She tapped the side of her head.

What do you think?

She put her drink on the railing. Go easy, she said.

The next day at work, a Tuesday, Jesse brought me a sandwich.

I can't tonight, I said.

But, he said. Band practice tonight at my house. You've got to be there.

I went. Tuesday nights became an institution and when I'd get there, Jesse would be unloading his bass from the back of his wagon. It was big as a person, in a padded black case. Jesse's cousins and friends of the Buckley family rotated through, playing guitar and banjo. RC was the banjo player, but he sometimes came and sometimes didn't. When he came, he was high on pills and the mood was tense, when he didn't, Jesse eyed the door all night and the mood was tenser. Jesse's dad Don played mandolin and was in charge, and after we had all drunk for a while, he said OK, and the men got out their instruments. Jesse leaned against the bass, his eyes closed of course, and plucked the huge white ropes with bent fingers. They always played the same songs every time, Bluegrass standards that I had never heard before. I sat and listened to them

play from the time I got off work until the early morning. If Don made them play the same song over and over again, I didn't complain.

What I did was drink. I stopped at McCall's and bought a twelve-pack of Old Milwaukee and when I went to put it in the beer fridge, every crisper drawer was full. There was nowhere to put it except my face. I would finish the twelve pack and sniff around for what was next. Rum and cokes in jars that had once held tomato sauce, whole bottles of perfumed Boone's Farm wine; the rest of a plastic handle of Old Crow could disappear in a night if I was there. It is not so much the volume of liquid consumed that astounds as it is the volume of space created. I built towers of cans twenty high, and a woodpile's worth of empty cardboard boxes.

More, I said, at four in the morning when I had to get up at seven for a meeting with Timmons. I could throw up and then come back in and fix a new drink, something sweet and soothing to the stomach.

Your girl is crazy, Don said to Jesse, when I poured generous shots into two coffee mugs, but he'd tug my ponytail in a fatherly way, then tip his cup back too.

I like her, RC said, She's committed. RC had just gotten his third DUI but compromised by letting the cops install an ignition lock and portable breathalyzer that demanded the driver to pass a breath test in order for the car to start.

After everyone else left, Jesse and I would lie side by side and sleep for a few hours until it was time to get up for work. Jesse began driving me to the Observatory if we were running late, which was often, but if we weren't, I still stopped at Sam's.

You're alive, Sam said one morning. She stood in her red robe, and I stood in a towel. Beads of water collected at the ends of my hair until they got too large and fell.

You haven't slept here in a week, she said.

I'm fine, I said. Just tired.

She touched my forehead with the back of my hand.

Her hair, up in its perky blonde nub was so shiny. Her robe was so red, this house where she lived was so good, well-insulated, warm in winter with thick modern windows, she was so well-slept, on her way to a job which she liked fine and would be on time for.

I feel fine, I said. It hurt my face to look at her.

Go easy, she said again, and stepped onto the clean bathroom tile.

Jesse started offering to pay my rent at Sam's house and twice drove slow by Leonard's Chevrolet and pointed out a nice four-wheel-drive hatchback.

I cherish the Shapiro family Volvo, I laughed.

But Jesse said, You can't go another winter in that thing. Plus, I can't drive it.

Why not?

I can't drive stick, Jesse said. I just never learned.

Jesse didn't want to go to a potluck unless I wanted to go, didn't like cauliflower unless I made it, really didn't eat much at all—would forget to be hungry—unless I brought him a plate and put it on the table next to the pink couch, but when I wanted these things, Jesse's desire rose up and matched mine. He'd tell people about our plans days in advance. On Tuesday, he'd say to Don, We're going to a movie on Saturday.

I'd never known power like that—the power to create a desire in another person and then satisfy it—and until I did, I'd thought that I wouldn't want it. I'd thought of myself as a principled person, as a person who could do the hard thing, if a hard thing

was required. I thought that all people were essentially made up of the same stuff, that all people were essentially the same amount of smart, the same amount of wanting, the same amount of alive, that all people have essentially equal capacity—for mobility, for freedom, for change—and an equal shot. But there was nothing the same about Jesse and me. I could do anything to him and he would still want it.

I love you, Jesse said, predictably, eventually, and when he did, I wanted to unzip my body like a suit, step out of it, and walk away forever. It was an intolerable thing to admit that I had been given more, that I had more than Jesse. I could not tolerate it.

Love, I said.

We could keep riffing on this theme. That poor schlub. For years after I left Viney, I believed this. I talked about Jesse to my friends back in the city, and tried to fill my voice with pity. That was a senseless year, I'd say, we were just a couple of drunks fucking in the dark. There was a crackle between us. But it was only that, radio static. I left, he stayed. And who is Jesse to talk back, to say, that's not how it happened? He is nobody. I see Jesse, but otherwise, he is not seen. The camera of the world doesn't know where to look for Jesse, and if it did, it would look away from him. I could have skipped knowing him and become myself anyway. But that's not the way it happened. I'd like to tell Adam, You were wrong. No body can absorb everything and give nothing back.

Viney got a late snow and then three more. I dug my car out of Jesse's driveway every morning, then had to dig it out again in the parking lot of the Observatory. I forgot to put the shovel back in my car once, and learned that I could dig myself out with

nothing but a rock and my bare hands. Work was slow, people hunkering down in the storms, the only problem that came up a group of flying squirrels who had been outfitted with transmitters by the Fish and Wildlife service to collect data on a deadly tree fungus. I was hung-over a lot anyway. I tried to read in my office to fill the time, but I just stared at the words on the page until they blurred.

In spring, I got better at driving the roads. I learned that I could drive the whole way from Viney to the Observatory without braking hardly at all, that when I was coming fast into a switchback and my foot went to the brake, if I resisted that, if I didn't brake, I would swing around the turn in this clean, satisfying way. I could make a tank of gas last a month, then two. As cars passed me going the other direction, the drivers raised two fingers like they knew me.

Jesse's room got hot early and had no blinds, and I'd wake up slick with sweat, still drunk. I started telling Timmons I was headed off somewhere, but then go find a quiet side road to pull my car over in the shade and nap in the backseat until a plausible amount of time had passed. I stopped looking so much at everything. The trees were green, the mountains were brown, and the road was black. When I had to be in my office, I laid my forehead against the cool metal of my desk and tried to imagine what might lie at the end of the summer. I'd only committed to Timmons through August, but I'd smashed up my old life even more successfully than I'd hoped when I moved to the Quiet Zone, cutting off all communication with friends in a final farewell online missive announcing my new radiation-free lifestyle. I still talked to my parents on Sam's landline sometimes on Sundays.

Just come home, my mom said.

Home, New York City, sat like a soft stone in my pocket that I would rub every so often to make sure it was still there. To miss a place means you've lost it, and I knew I could never lose a city the size of New York.

One Tuesday in July, we stood on Jesse's porch.

Late in the night, Don said to Jesse, Sing one.

Jesus, RC said. I'm so tired of his voice. RC turned to me. Right?

I've never heard him sing like that, so loud! Jesse's stepmother told me while Jesse sang, nasal and high, putting her hand on my arm and squeezing it.

Later in bed, Jesse said, I sang! Did you hear?

I was scooted up on the pillow and trying to hold on to the wall, but my head kept lolling uncooperatively against the nightstand.

He kissed me, touched my neck with his bent hand like an alien touching down on a human face. Come on, Jesse said. I'll make you feel good.

We were naked, rocking, when RC opened the door and came into the dark room. He stood, jeans and no shirt, in the space where the door had been. I pushed Jesse towards the wall and pulled the blanket up and over me.

Man, Jesse said. But RC did not move. RC breathed in, and then breathed out wetly, as if through an oxygen mask. RC, Jesse said, and following Jesse's voice, RC walked to the bed. He put a hand on the mattress and leaned, about to roll in with us.

No, I said. I pushed against RC, trying to keep him out, but RC sat anyway. Jesse, I said.

Jesse came around the bed and took RC gently by the arm. He's drunk, Jesse said. Laura, he's only drunk. Still naked, Jesse pulled his brother from the bed. He locked the little gold button on the doorknob behind RC, and got back in bed.

There's nothing wrong, he said.

I couldn't speak.

What? Jesse said.

Nothing.

Are you homesick?

No, I said.

You're going to leave, aren't you, he said. It was not a question.

It was true that I had begun to touch the stone in my pocket more often. I had begun to see myself again. I would walk the long subway exchange tunnel at 14th street between sixth and seventh avenues where the men sell incense and yellow oil in tiny vials and dance to their portable CD players. I would take the subway all the way to Coney Island where my dad grew up. The train would come above ground and hurtle into the day, and I would watch as brick walls tagged with exuberant graffiti and men sleeping on cardboard and green glass bottles rolled by. I would sit on a bench and watch the seagulls tear apart a piece of hot dog bun and the old Russian couples walking arm in arm, their boom boxes carrying the news from far away. All I would do was watch.

I'm not, I said.

Good, he said. Because if you do, I'm a goner.

I'm here, I said. I'm not going anywhere.

When Jesse was silent, I touched him again.

Once created, radio waves exist independently from the thing that created them. They are independent entities, and they cannot be erased or called back. They will continue to travel through free space until they are received, even after the original transmitter is taken away.

Jesse and I were asleep at the Homeplace when the phone rang. It rang itself out. I got up to pee and stood in the kitchen. When the phone rang again, I answered it.

Laura, Timmons said. We've lost the pulsar.

I'll come, Jesse said, when I shook him awake.

Don't, I said.

Not like that, Jesse said. Come on, give me a ride, will you? I have to be at work too, and I'm too loaded to drive.

The straight stretch through Viney Mountain was blind with fog. Jesse slept.

At the Observatory, the spectrum analyzer was spiking just sitting on my desk.

What does that mean? Jesse said.

It must be very, very close, I said. We walked down the linoleum hallway past Timmons' office. The light was off, but Timmons was in there, sitting not at his flat white monitor as usual, but in a thick leather armchair in the corner opposite the door. He sat up very straight and very still, his hands on his great kneecaps, and by the big way he was breathing, and the urgency of his eyebrows, I thought, He's praying.

When Jesse and I stepped outside and turned towards the Telescope, there was no more need for the spectrum analyzer. At the base of the Telescope, was a red station wagon.

The Telescope filled the sky in a way that made me expect noise, as when you see a jet plane long before you hear it. The day was still, and getting hotter. The fog was lifting.

Shit, Jesse said, when we got closer in a truck. Shit, shit, shit.

RC had the hatch of his wagon open and was sitting on the back bumper.

Brother, he said, when Jesse approached.

RC opened his arms and Jesse went into them. RC's back was toward me, and I could see Jesse patting RC's back with his claw-like hands.

You're OK, Jesse said. His face was to me, his chin resting on RC's shoulder. You're OK, Jesse said again, as if he could convince RC of it.

RC pulled away, when he heard my steps. Laura? RC said. I can't see her.

I stepped closer. What are you doing here? I wanted to know.

RC looked up at the telescope. Why not? Look at it. It's beautiful, he said. Also, RC said, I got thirsty and then my wagon wouldn't start.

We've got to get you out of here, I said.

Laura, RC said. For once in your life, can you not think? Don't think, he said. Don't worry about a thing, he said. Have a drink. Let's all just have a drink and then we'll clear out of here. RC pulled a bottle of tequila from underneath a blanket by his thigh. I felt a headache already starting to prickle around my hairline.

Jesse passed me the bottle. I opened my mouth and let the bottle bump along my teeth once, then a few more times.

I thought: Three thousand years ago, when the Canaanites first observed that two objects not physically touching could exert forces on each other, they named it El.

Literally, God.

I counted to eight, thinking of the lighthouse in the sky. Maybe Timmons had only been counting too. I took the bottle up again, and started over.

When the lights came back on, I was horizontal on the couch in the Homeplace. I raised my head. Jesse was next to me on the floor. The house was silent, no wind, no music, only the sun coming in through the white lace curtains in the living room. We'd driven my car and I'd been the one to drive it. None of us could have started RC's and Jesse couldn't drive mine. Plus something in my hands knew it. I had turned the key in the ignition, put the car in drive, driven down the driveway of the Observatory, turned right onto the state road and gone the seven miles, braking around the switchbacks and pressing the clutch and then the gas as the car climbed up Viney Mountain, turned into the driveway, put the car in park.

Go, I thought. Go now. Go today. But then. Go where? I knew these roads so well now I could drive them when my mind was gone. I lost those miles. They were still there, but I carried them in my hands, the edges of my hair, the soles of my blue clogs.

Jesse was asleep in the soft case of his bass, his neck curled like a swan.

Open your eyes, I said.

Jesse stirred, stretching the walls of the bass case.

I don't want this, I said.

What? he said, pulling his baseball cap down over his eyes. Where?

I don't want to be here.

He sat up against the couch. Why? he wanted to know.

I don't know, I said. This was one true thing I said.

What do you want? he said.

I want you to want something, I said.

I want you, he said.

Something else, I said. I wanted him to want his life.

He took the hat off and put it behind him on the couch. His hair was thick and parted down the middle and was swooped from the hat. I got down on the floor next to him. I reached over and gripped both sides of his thin head with my hands.

Earth to Jesse! I said. Jesse, are you in there? I knocked on his skull with the knuckles of one hand.

Jesse jerked his head, trying to get free of me, but I straddled him and sat down on his chest, pushing him to the bass case again. He made burbling sounds and slapped at my knees. But I weighed more than him. I pressed my thumbs into his cheeks and held the back of his hair and shook his head.

Come on, I said. I was yelling. Open your eyes. I put my fingers on his forehead and pulled his eyelids up with my thumbs. What I saw of Jesse's eyes were brown.

Get, Jesse said. No, he said, rolling his head back and forth away from my fingers, No, no no. The pitch of his voice was high, but it wasn't loud, it had no urgency to it. Maybe I wanted him to yell at me, to say *that's right you bitch*, or else I wanted him to hit me, to prove Sam wrong, to show that he was capable of that one thing.

You're so weak, I said. You really are weak.

I let his head clunk against the floor, and he blinked at me in the noon light, breathing hard. I rolled myself off of him. Neither of us spoke, as we pulled ourselves

up and sat on the pink couch.

You ruined me, I thought then. I'm ruined now.

I don't know what you want me to want, Jesse said.

Outside, it was summer. The field behind Jesse's house was Technicolor green and calling out to be driven through. From the other room, I could hear the faint wet sound of RC breathing, a drunk's white sleep, empty of dreams.

I came back, I came back. I am a citizen of this world again, with its proper tools. I walk, in a throng of puffy coats and leather satchels through the Fourteenth Street exchange tunnel, watching the light my body makes along the white tile. Someone clips my heel with their boot, someone bonks my shoulder with their parcel; it is wrapped in brown paper and tied with white string and I'd like it for myself. The things people try to say into their phones as they walk through the zones of this tunnel where the sandalwood hangs heavy—mostly, What? and also When? and furthermore, I'm late, I'm late—will break your heart, and I can't stop listening. But for what?

It could still happen. Jesse could still turn on. Inside Jesse's body there is someone else, I feel sure, some other Jesse who knows what was passed between us—that charge that says you've lived enough already to shut this whole operation down, and which has never hummed to me again—and who with a few lucid words, traveling through free space, could bring down upon me the world of hurt I am still owed and which I have gone asking for everywhere strangers touch hands on their way to some other speechless place.

LONG BEFORE THAT

As Bobby, I was beautiful. Bobby was solid and Bobby was tan. Bobby's chest was trim and sun-bleached, two slight diagonal lines that narrowed gradually to the horizontal lip of his jeans. The jeans were indigo denim, worn every day and washed every night, reinforced over the knees, and capped by camel-colored leather boots that laced up tight and right. Bobby hitchhiked around Seneca County sometimes to get from here to there if he was low on money. He was the Evans boy. The cars, they pulled over into the ditch or the shoulder or stopped in the middle of the road, even around a switchback, even at night, they all stopped, Sure thing, I'm going your way. Bobby wore his long blond hair up in a bun and sometimes a strand would fall down into his eyes while he was nailing shingles or sanding drywall, and as he took his index finger with its squarely-trimmed nail, drawing the strand across his blond eyebrow and pulsing temple and placing it behind his ear, he would smell his own hand—which could smell like sawdust or rosemary or roast beef or coffee—and think, depending on the day of the week and the nature of the job, it's Tuesday and I am building a house, or it's Wednesday and I am tearing one down. But every so often, the stars would align when the crew worked on a sunny weekend and the old trouble would come seeping through his pores, and he would smell his hand, and look at it, the fingers straight all the way through the knuckles and the brown hairs springing from their individual follicles, and think, it's Saturday and I am not at home in this body.

On Sundays, after church, Bobby and his wife Carol cut wood. Bobby drove them in the truck up a logging road to the top of Viney Mountain, then left it at a wide spot. A person following Bobby and Carol from behind would have had a time telling who was who, both in old jeans cuffed above the ankle, white shirts from the same pack of six, work shirts that buttoned but that weren't buttoned now, long dirty blond hair in low ponytails. You could tell Carol because she was the one who carried the metal-framed pack, which was full of whole wheat honey bread, cans of deer meat, tomatoes pickled dilly beans; water.

Carol stopped and pulled up a piece of jewelweed, green streaked with ruby red at its nub just above the root. She cracked the base of the stalk, and rubbed the clear juice onto Bobby's calves and then onto her own, where the nettle by the truck had stung them. As she lingered, Bobby drew the string on the pack and fished out a can of beans.

What is a dilly bean anyway? Bobby wanted to know. Was it not just a green bean soaking in salt?

They'd gone to elementary school together back when there was still Viney Mountain Elementary, the Mountain Lions. Then they'd been eighteen, and lying in a dry creek bed while boys in boots crushed cans into flat disks against river rocks.

What is it, honey? Carol wanted to know. There was every single star.

Something, Bobby said. I didn't ask for it, Bobby said, but I understand too much about girls. I know all about you. I understand what smells good and what looks good and what it feels like to brush your teeth and run your fingers through your hair, to be silly, to feel joy, to put on a baseball cap backwards or forwards depending on your

mood, to open your closet and think, the possibilities! I know how to rock back and forth on my heels, how to dance around the living room while my wet hair dries, how to be seen through a window, how to look even with your head turned away.

Is that all, honey? Carol said. Is that all that's eating you? But you've got it all wrong. That isn't how it is for me at all. I know about standing in a circle, beer in my hand, feeling the place where my shoulder blades hit against my shirt, a certain tightness in the jaw, clicking the tongue, layers of jackets on and all of them hanging open, thinking if I wanted to, if it were necessary, I could force any person in this circle to their knees. I know about looking across the fire at someone, looking at someone all night, how to keep looking at someone past the point of welcome.

When the hardening began, Bobby acknowledged it. It felt good that his body belonged to him, but when he looked down, the cock flesh made no sense. It didn't hurt him, it simply was, an addition, an extra, and Carol had always understood this. They pressed up against one another, and this was what Bobby liked best, all that pressure that could go anywhere. Often this was enough, this was making love for Bobby.

Carol ran the chainsaw until the vibrating made her fingers go numb and she couldn't feel the metal grip anymore, and then she gave it to Bobby. When his fingers went numb too, she took it up again. Carol approached a downed oak, and used the bar of the chainsaw to measure and groove. When she pulled the string, her calf muscles jumped just below her pant cuffs. The saw went in easy, then it was flip the log and finish the cut, then Bobby's job, to haul the logs to the tree line where the logging road picked up again.

Isn't that enough? Bobby wanted to know, after a while.

Not nearly, Carol said.

They switched again. Bobby took up the chainsaw, and Carol rolled and rolled.

Look honey, Carol said, bending down in the dirt to pick up a woolly bear on the back of her hand. The black creature humped along Carol's finger. Carol placed her nose in the sinew of Bobby's neck and shook it, side to side.

The June night Bobby Evans and Don Buckley found the bodies of the Rainbow Girls, side by side on top of Viney Mountain just before dark, it was Bobby who stayed with them while Don went to the law.

They were working on a Saturday. That morning, Bobby had stayed in bed listening as Carol rattled down the stairs to put the coffee on. Since Carol had gotten pregnant she'd started saying No no no, at night, saying You're crowding me, this is my side of the bed, go back to your side.

She climbed the stairs and then filled the room. She flung open the dark wood door of the wardrobe.

Where is your blue suit? she wanted to know.

Who knows, Bobby said. Why?

Church tomorrow, Carol said. No more shlubby Carol and Bobby allowed. She patted her bulging stomach. No sir, she said.

By the time Bobby and Don had picked up the drywall sander an hour south in Alderson and stopped in to see a friend and eaten a sandwich, the day was nearly done. They were coming back, in Bobby's blue Astro van with the racing stripes. The van held

Bobby's banjo and Don's mandolin and the drywall sander besides. They had plans to go to Don's place and play a few before Bobby went home to Carol. Through the worn denim of his pants, Bobby felt the metal finger picks that went on his middle and index fingers. He was anxious to put them on and clack them together like claws, anxious to get loose and think of other things, while they practiced for their weekly spot at the restaurant during the Friday night dinner rush.

How's Carol feeling? Don asked.

Fine, Bobby said. We were just at the clinic last week.

Good, Don said. That's very good. He was writing in the small ledger book he used to keep track of everything he and Bobby did for work.

Except, Bobby said. Get this. Carol is a freak. Turns out her heart is on the right side of her body, instead of the left. Dextrocardia, they call it! It's rare, they said, but not necessarily bad.

Don laughed. And you never noticed?

No, Bobby said. They said it can echo on the left side so it sounds like a regular heart would.

Weird, Don said.

I wonder if the baby will have it, Bobby said.

I'd like a cabin, Don said. His hand stopped writing. In the back field of my house, by the river, Don said.

What for? Bobby said.

What do you mean what for? Don said. For enjoying, is what.

We could play music in there, Bobby said.

We could do anything in there, Don said. We could put our feet up and not talk to our wives or kids. We could watch movies about men on motorcycles. We could draw.

Bobby looked at Don.

What? Don said. I used to draw.

Bobby turned the Astro van off the black top and onto state park road until it came to a T, then took the dirt towards Don's. But when they came to the wide place with the rock where the van always bottomed out, Bobby saw two girls lying in the grass.

Hey, Bobby said. Girls. Bobby slowed the van. It was still light out, but barely.

Where? Don said.

There, Bobby said.

That's wrong, Don said.

What is?

Their bodies, Don said.

What is the nature of the word body, and why are we a person when we are alive and a body when we are dead? At first, Bobby could think thoughts like this. After Don drove off in Bobby's blue Astro van, with a loud call to stay put, Bobby sat on a nearby rock. He covered his eyes with his hands and tried to think of other things. He thought about Carol, and wondered what she was doing at that moment, if she was taking the doctor's advice, though he knew the answer was no, careful was not who she was. Even now, on Sundays, she'd throw up into the dry leaves and then start the chainsaw.

But then the wind blew a piece of Bobby's hair down from his bun and he raised a hand to swat it away and saw the foot that was closest to him which was missing a shoe, a

blue sport sandal judging by the foot that was second closest to him. From there he could not help but walk over to the bodies so he could look more closely at the bare foot. It had mud on its sole and between the toes, which were hairy, their nails unpolished and a little overgrown, and then at the other foot that was still encased in its blue sports sandal, a cheap foam deal with several criss-crossing straps over the toes and a thick heel that velcroed down. He leaned over, looking at the legs which were tanned with calf muscles big as grapefruits.

Bobby let his eyes rise then over the denim cutoffs to the red cotton t-shirt which encased large breasts that pulled the fabric between them into wavy lines. Since Carol got pregnant, she had breasts like these now, which she kept all the time strapped down in a white sports bra.

And then Bobby let himself see the neck and head, and take in the fact of the blood that covered the short hair like a skullcap and the piece of head flesh that was gone. Bobby got down on his knees. He looked at the other one, her straight skinny legs stuck out of khaki shorts which were splattered with mud. Two holes were burned into her purple hooded sweatshirt which said HOFSTRA. The holes were ringed with some blood, but not too much, and the string of her sweatshirt had been pulled so that it hung down unevenly on one side. Bobby held every detail. He was trying to remember how a girl body worked. He inspected the second girl's lips, which were chapped, and the places where her shorts stood away from her thighs, making small tents of fabric. He inspected her braids, which were not regular braids.

What could have happened, what would have happened, had this girl from somewhere else not ended up here, had she not died? They would have been girlfriends. She would have taught him how to make braids like that.

The winter before, during their Friday night spot, a music man had been driving through Viney on the way to the ski resort and had stopped at the restaurant. The man was tall, and wore faded black dungarees and a navy blue and white Yankees ball cap, but Bobby had seen the dark Saab with white New York plates parked in the small church lot. While Bobby and Don's band played, the man pressed the pads of his fingers to his closed eyelids. Bobby could see that the music did the same thing to this Jew that it did to him: there was the world, but it was canceled out.

Do you like to travel? the man asked. He handed Don and Bobby each his business card, then blew his nose into two pleated napkins from the dispenser on his table. Don had lived in Chicago for most of his twenties, driving back on Christmas and Easter and weekends when he could swing it—the Northbound Lane Blues, it was called in Viney—but not Bobby.

So they took two more guys for bass and rhythm guitar and Bobby's Astro van with the racing stripes and went up through New York and New Jersey, as far north as Niagra Falls, then back down again. Went into Pennsylvania as far west as Pittsburgh. Gone two, three, weeks at a time. Almost all college campuses, the coffee house circuit, the New Yorker had called it. They lugged instruments down beer-sticky stairs, hoisted them on top of cheap platforms, wheeled them into black box theaters and fluorescent auditoriums. They met all kinds of girls. They met girls who had never seen a mandolin

before, girls that could play as good as Don, rich girls at all girls schools, girls who had convertibles, girls who didn't shower, girls who wore spikes around their necks, who wore chains that connected their ears to their pants pockets. Girls who loved them, girls who booed and threw peanut shells, girls on electric guitars who opened for them, girls in country dresses and cowboy boots. Ugly girls, ugly on purpose.

Don would scan the audience for girls, picking a girl to sing the sweet songs to, then going over to find out where the party was. Bobby played the banjo and played it well he thought, here a slide, there the rhythmic way the veins and tendons in his right hand moved as he switched from the forward roll to the alternating thumb roll.

Bobby, Don said in Princeton. We're going to the Polka Dot Lounge. You're coming with.

I can't, Bobby said. I've got to call Carol.

Don stuck out his jaw and nodded. Float your own boat then, he said, turning towards the girls zipping their leather and sheepskin jackets.

The lettuce is coming up, Carol said. The forest behind McCall's is coming down.

What else? Bobby wanted to know.

Don came back to the motel room at four in the morning with a bag of sunflower seeds. He sat on the foot of the polyester-comforted bed and turned on the TV.

Look at this, Don said. On the screen, a woman with long dark hair wore strapped-on butterfly wings and was dancing. There was a lot of bending from the hip. The wings looked to be made of wire and blue silk and each side had a long tail that the woman kept stepping on. Then she broke into a run and the tails lifted out behind her.

Amazing, Don said.

Then, on their last trip, they'd played Hofstra University and stayed with the New Yorker in his apartment full of woven mats and books with uneven edges. He'd driven them across the river in his Saab, past raised billboards for hookers and signs in Spanish and a round Asian language Bobby didn't know, past a cemetery on a wide hill where there were no plastic flowers, and the bodies sat in big granite houses with gates. People died here too, of course. Every car with its windows down played a different radio station.

Look, Don said. He was absorbing the images with the maximum surface area his eyeballs could provide. Look.

All this had been good to Bobby, but he didn't need it. Then, in the coffee shop on the Hofstra campus where they played, there was a girl who stood with her elbows resting on the top of a tall metal bar table. The girl was tall, slim and flat-chested, with a thick neck and shiny brown hair bobbed at her chin. She wore a plaid wool cape draped over her shoulders and brown leather boots with a chunky stacked heel that made her even taller. She scribbled in a small notebook all throughout the show, barely looking up during any song, then came over to Bobby when the band was packing up the sound system. Up close, Bobby saw that her whole forearm was encircled by multicolored Bakelite bangle bracelets.

Here, she had said to Bobby, and gave him a folded up piece of notebook paper. Her bracelets clacked and slid down her arm, which was tan, the arm hairs bleached. Bobby opened the paper and saw that it was a drawing of him in a garden. Oversized

turnips grew around him, and large-leafed flowers, and Bobby was pulling the plants out of the ground, hair hanging down into the dirt.

Bobby looked down at the girl.

What's your name? he wanted to know.

Call me Barbara, she said and walked back to rejoin her friends.

What's this? Don said, wrapping an extension cord palm to elbow. Don considered the drawing. Not bad, he said.

Teach me how to do my hair like yours, Bobby said aloud to the dead girl, as the light went from Viney Mountain.

It's easier to learn if you do it *to* someone, she said, and laughed.

Do it to me, Bobby said, turning his back to her.

Barbara got up on her heels behind Bobby. Barbara took Bobby's hands in hers and pulled the hair elastic from his bun, letting his hair tumble down onto his shoulders.

First, you divide the hair into two sections, Barbara said.

Bobby felt his hair being parted in half. One half was tied up in a loose pigtail with the hair elastic.

Then you divide the hair into three smaller sections, Barbara said, and the creases between Bobby's fingers filled with hair. They started braiding, pulling the three small sections of blond hair taut against Bobby's scalp.

Carol won't like this, Bobby told Barbara, laughing nervously, full of pleasure.

Barbara stopped braiding. Because she thinks you're a fag?

Yes, Bobby said.

Are you?

No.

Barbara finished the braid. She took the end, then tickled Bobby's ear with it.

Who cares what Carol thinks then?

I care, Bobby said. I love her.

The wind blew and blew.

Can I ask you? Bobby said.

Go ahead.

When did you know you were beaten? Was it when the gun was at your head?

Oh no. It was long before that.

The blue Astro van was scratching up the road now, and a state trooper car too.

Don slammed the door to the van shut and strode over to Bobby.

Over here! Don called.

While Bobby and Don waited by the van for the state police detective who was driving down from Elkins to talk to them, the trooper stood in the dark field shining his flashlight over the bodies.

Don sat on the ground with his back against the van, and Bobby kicked the road with his boot.

Bobby, Don said. Stop it.

Bobby flushed. He put his hands up to cover his hair.

Your feet, Don said. Stop kicking.

Bobby stopped.

Don took off his knit cap and held it out. You might want this, Don said, for when the detective gets here.

Bobby took the hat and pulled it on. It was tight. He had never considered before that Don's head might be smaller than his.

Thanks, Bobby said.

They're going to suspect everybody on Viney Mountain for this, Don said. I'm just glad I know where I was today, he said. I was with you. I was with you, the whole time.

At home, Carol could not cook. She tried to cook, turned on a burner, got a pot out from the cupboard, went looking for its lid. But she got derailed cutting carrots.

Why honey? she asked Bobby then, letting the knife lie flat against the wooden cutting board. Who killed those girls? And why didn't anyone stop it?

Bobby put the kettle on, then took Carol's elbow and led her to the wooden dining room table, the top a cross-section of a big stump they'd cut and sanded together.

Bobby hugged Carol, and she shook her nose from side to side in his neck for a long time.

I was only a girl, Bobby said. What could a girl like me do?

No, Carol said. No, no, no.

Bobby took off the hat. The right a sloppy braid, the left a pigtail.

Honey, your hair, Carol said. But she kept looking at him. You shouldn't, she said.

But Carol scooted her chair closer to Bobby. She kissed him. It was a good kiss like they hadn't had in some time. Carol was pulling him up out of his chair. Carol was leaning her head back, stepping towards their wooden bed.

In the bedroom, Carol unbuttoned Bobby's pants, took off her shirt and her own drawstring pants, but left her sports bra on. Then she lay back on their wedding quilt, clutched the interlocking rings of its pattern in her fists, and waited.

Bobby lay his ear on Carol's right breast, and listened. There was the heart, beating. But when he put his ear to her left breast, there it was also.

Bobby wanted Carol to be happy. He began to lick her softly. Carol sighed for a while. Then a breeze came through the window and the open pane whacked against the wall, and, as if remembering something, Carol pulled Bobby up and said, Just do it.

Other times of course, Bobby had.

Carol, he said. He held her face in his hands. Her eyes were closed. No, he said.

But Carol got on top of Bobby anyway. Bobby cried. He'd seen two dead girls that day, dead in a field when it wasn't even dark yet, and all he had thought of was his own hair. Also, he knew, he would not feel the inside of a person again in this way. He saw the girls alive again, moving away from him, their calf muscles whipping, there, not there, there again, their arms pumping. They were running towards him, growing larger, then crashing into him, pushing him forward into Carol, tossing him up on his back, breathless, beached.

It was Bobby who lay there a long time next to Carol, blinking his eyes into the dark even when Carol got up and the shower squeaked on. It was Bobby that went into the kitchen, who stood over the sink, naked, drinking from the tap with his mouth.

But it was me who went back into the bedroom. It was me who turned on the light.

Carol, I said, breathing in snot.

She stood by the window in her sports bra and drawstring pants. She was running a plastic brush through her hair, which was dark with water and hung in sharp pieces like it had just been cut. She turned her head and looked at me.

No, she said.

Call me Barbara, I said. I held out my hand.

When she turned, she held her back with both hands and I saw how her body was not a line any longer but a curve. The plastic-capped bristles of the brush in her hand pointed away from her. I would have done anything she asked. I would have worn my blue suit and shaken everyone's hand.

Carol hugged herself, shivering. I was thinking John, she said, if it's a boy.

What a name, I said. Now that is a name.

DEADHEADING

In the dark blue space between night and morning, Kendra is biking to work in Philadelphia when she sees a flatbed truck, carrying a single steel coil, fueling up at the all-night station on Baltimore Avenue. In side profile, the coil resembles a giant-sized roll of duct tape, its layers of silver wound so tight it looks solid, rising six feet tall from zenith to resting point, and secured with heavy chains. It sits precisely in the middle of the trailer, loaded eye-to-the-side as if it could roll right down and off the flatbed. There are words, trucker's words, for this particular way of hauling a coil—suicide-loaded—but they don't matter to Kendra now. What matters is remembering the weekend she rode through Tennessee in her father's orange Freightliner Cascadia to deliver a steel coil just like this one. The memory is six years old, but she is always finding reasons for it.

It's afternoon when the memory begins, the truck is on the Tennessee side of Bristol, moving south on I-81. Kendra is sixteen, home is still Viney Mountain, West Virginia. Her father, Dude, picked up in Richmond and is delivering in Little Rock, which put home right on the way, but Kendra knows it was her mom who insisted that Dude stop and pick up his daughter. Recently, Kendra's mom has been on the phone late at night with Nina Daniels. This isn't unusual per se, the Daniels' and Kendra's parents sometimes get together at the Daniels' farmhouse on the site of the old commune to smoke weed and debate natural childbirth and the rising up of the Appalachian people. But there is something about these conversations, the way Kendra's mom holds the phone upright and slightly away from her ear maybe, or the way she stands over the sink and looks out the window at the round pen though it is empty of horses. Nina Daniels knows

what her daughter Carla and Kendra have begun doing in Carla's room on Friday nights by the light of the plastic lamppost in the Daniels' front yard. Now Kendra's mom does too.

The March sun is visible behind the white sky but does not shine through, and there is still patchy snow on the ground beyond the guardrails. Kendra can't get used to how, in the cab of the Freightliner, it seems they are not on the road but perched above it. She keeps putting a pen on the dash and watching it roll back from the vibration of the engine, keeps watching Dude's green Coleman thermos rattle against its jumbo cup holder, keeps adjusting her air-powered leather passenger seat depending on the car they're passing so she can get the best view inside it.

"There's art to being a trucker," Dude is saying. "It's not like music, but it's there just the same." Dude's fingers tap the wheel, which is big as a pizza. Dude wears dark jeans and a clean white t-shirt from the packs of three Kendra's mother buys at the beginning of each month and keeps in the hall closet. Lately, they've been piling up.

Dude goes on. "They told me in driver's school, that any fool can point this truck down the road. The trick comes in anticipating."

"Anticipating what?" Kendra wants to know. She sits with her legs crossed Indian style and lowers her chair to get a look into a white low-rider.

"Don't just look at the car in front of you. That car's important, my trainer would say, because it's the one that's gonna get squashed underneath you if something happens, but there's only so much you can do about that. Concentrate on the cars up ahead of that first one. Look at the eighth car, and the sixth, and the third. What will they do, when push comes to shove? That's what you want to be able to know."

From this height, the people inside the cars look like figures from the museum dioramas Kendra saw the month before in Charleston: a wide green Cadillac contains a white-haired couple in matching sunglasses, him driving, her blowing her nose into a tissue; in the rear footwells are maps, a case of bottled water, the box of tissues. A Dodge Titan houses a horseman in jeans and a baseball cap eating from a bag of potato chips on the dash, and pulling a trailer with a single Palomino inside. A red Prius holds a college girl wearing a purple shirt; the back seat is folded down to accommodate the laundry hamper and plastic crates of books and what Kendra thinks is a big soft case for an upright bass. Her skirt has hiked up, and Kendra can see her knees and the place where her thighs come together. When the woman looks up and sees Kendra staring, she speeds up, stubborn, refusing to be passed, so Dude shifts into twelfth, then thirteenth, and finally does pass her. He stays in the left lane, though there is no one to pass now.

“What would they say in truck school about riding left?” Kendra wants to know.

“They’d hate it,” Dude says. “But they don’t know about fun.”

Kendra is hungry, she looks around for what Dude has on hand. The cab has been vacuumed so recently that Kendra can see the faint lines on the floor mats and velour seats where Dude ran the coin-operated nozzle. It smells of bananas, which sit in the sleeper in a paper sack on top of his blue cooler. Inside the cooler is four days’ worth of ground beef, goat cheese, several gallons of water, Ball jars of tomato sauce, and green beans in brine. Kendra opens one of the jars and begins munching on a dilly bean.

“Well?”

“Satisfactory,” Kendra says. “At least we won’t starve.”

“You have Nina and Carla to thank for those,” he says. “Nina brought them over this morning.”

Kendra pops the rest of the bean into her mouth.

“How is Carla?” Dude says. “Your mother said she was getting into trouble at school, not eating, other nonsense. Any change?”

Kendra has never lied to Dude, he’s been away this past year too much to make it necessary. There is nothing fundamentally altered about Carla since Dude saw her last year, she is still small, still wears her blond hair in two French braids. In the afternoons she can still be found gunning her four wheeler towards a pile of extra doors behind the Daniels’ tool shed. She still raises one eyebrow when someone says something she knows is wrong, especially a teacher, saying Oh really? And what facts do you have in support of that conclusion? She still stays up most nights reading by her bedside lamp until four in the morning, except that recently, on Fridays, she will put down the plastic-covered book from the Viney Public Library and say, You’re doing it again. What? Kendra asks. Looking. I’m not, I’m playing this banjo. Stop. Stop what? You know. I won’t then. But soon Carla will roll onto her hip and say, Poor Kendra, what are we going to do with you? and turn off the light.

“The same,” Kendra says.

Kendra looks at the coil’s shiny surface in her passenger side mirror.

“What’s it made of?”

“Steel.”

“Weight?”

“Forty-four. Had one last week that was more, maybe forty-eight thousand.”

“What for?”

“Building parts, car parts. Anywhere you see steel.”

Kendra ducks her head so she can walk back into the sleeper; already she’s almost as tall as Dude. She pulls Dude’s banjo out from underneath the fold-away bed and unbuckles the hard, black case. The instrument’s heavy wood back clunks her armrest as she sits again. The strings ring out.

“Would they use the coil for this?” Kendra asks, rubbing the nail of her index finger back and forth against the metal fasteners around the banjo’s head.

Dude looks over at her for a moment, then back at the road. “I don’t know. Maybe. That needs tuned.”

“You have a tuner back there?”

“Use your ear.”

Kendra picks the fifth string, the high G, once, twice, three times, tuning it up slowly, careful not to move the peg too fast and break the string, which is thin as dental floss. She knows it’s still not right. She picks it once more.

“Higher,” Dude says, so Kendra tweaks the peg and picks it again. “More,” Dude says, making a thumbs up with his right hand and gesturing with it towards the roof of the cab. Kendra picks the string again, and Dude gives a stationary thumbs up. They repeat this for the four remaining strings.

“Play something,” Dude says.

“What should I play?”

Dude presses the button on the CD player and a male-female duo sings a new version of an old song. “I played with this couple at a stop in Newton, Kansas,” Dude

says. “It was July and they were deadheading in a dairy reefer on their way back home. They invited everyone in the lot to come in their container and cool off for a few minutes, and we filled it up with music.” He nods to the stereo. “They gave this to me free.”

Kendra listens, but she doesn’t think it’s anything special.

“Play that back to me,” Dude says, dialing the volume way down. Kendra plays the song, pinching her thumb and forefinger at the same time so the top and bottom strings ring out together.

“Good,” Dude says. “Play it faster now.”

Kendra does. “Good,” Dude says. “Now try lifting up your index finger when you play the—”

“Like this?”

“No.” Dude looks over quickly again, then back to the road. “I can’t right now, but later.” Kendra plays the chorus of the song again then tries a verse. Dude hits the brake then, and Kendra looks up hard, but she can’t see anything.

“What?”

“Up ahead,” Dude says.

Traffic is slowing. They pass a lit flare, then another, and two cop cars are parked in the left lane, funneling traffic to the right. As they advance, foot by foot, Kendra can see the air over the grassy median rippling. A fire engine comes flashing along the shoulder on Dude’s side and rushes on ahead. Dude is riding the brake, the truck lurches then stops again and again and Kendra can see now, the fire whipping the windshield and front grate of the Dodge Titan, the hoses of water thick as fence posts pointed at the truck, the black smoke rising. The Palomino, somehow free, runs jagged in the median,

still wearing a padded warming blanket. The blanket is on fire, and its tail and mane too. A man in a thick yellow plastic suit points a rifle at the horse as it runs.

“Look away,” Dude says. When the rifle goes off, the horse bolts hard in the truck’s direction of traffic, then the man fires again, and twice more. The horse stops, stumbles, then stands again, its feet splayed. It doesn’t try to run again, only faces traffic, knock-kneed as a schoolgirl. Then, it pitches forward head first into the grass. “Kendra, look *away!*” Dude yells, and she does, looking again into the passenger side mirror at the coil, the beveled timber coil rack and the nylon straps Dude has used to secure it to the flatbed and what Kendra is wondering then, is how a tray of aluminum and wheels could carry forty-four thousand pounds of anything. Then the truck shudders and booms forward, Dude is shifting again, they’re picking up speed then cruising, the mountains disappearing behind them, the road flattening, and the sky opening up.

“It’s a good thing he had a gun,” Dude says. “That’s one good thing about it.”

They drive west on I-40. Kendra smushes her nose into the glass of the window. She wants to roll it down so she can see the new country better, but she knows that will let in too much wind. The space beyond the interstate has become a flat plain from which tall metal poles of varying heights rise above the road—a flashing screen on which three white bowling pins get knocked down again and again by the white outline of a black bowling ball, a chicken in a chef’s hat, a green dollar sign that Kendra watches in its moment of clicking on for the night. As the lights of Knoxville retreat, peeling message boards rise big and close, YOUR AD HERE, 865-JESUS 4U, a boy and a girl holding hands on a bed, the caption reading FOR WHAT I WANT I CAN WAIT.

“You’ve been to Tennessee before,” Dude says.

“No.”

“Not to visit your mother’s people?”

“When I was a baby, maybe,” Kendra says. “I’m hungry.”

“I know it. We’re almost there.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see. Tune the banjo again.”

They take a taxi from a Flying J truck stop outside Nashville. It begins to rain, hard, and the cab slows, the driver talking to himself in some other language, no, talking into a small rectangle of plastic like a flash drive clipped to his earlobe. Kendra rubs the cuff of her shirt over and over the blue vinyl material of the taxi’s seat and watches out her window as the floodlights on the highway are out-brighted by office buildings, every floor illuminated, every room, movie theaters whose offerings tick by like breaking news, 9:00, 9:10, 9:20, Kendra can’t believe how often a new movie begins here.

“Goddamn,” Dude says, looking out his window. The banjo sits between them in its case. “What a waste,” he says, “all those lights on at night,” but he keeps watching. “Goddamn,” he says again, wiping the sleeve of his Pendleton coat across his eyes.

The cab driver lets them out onto a wet parking lot with three open dumpsters side by side. Dude opens an unmarked door and Kendra follows him down a hallway with a black and white linoleum floor that ends in another door. There is music behind it; Kendra can hear the mandolin first, playing the kickoff for a song she knows. It plays each of the three high intro notes quick across its pair of strings, dum, dum, dum, then the wrist flicking like a hummingbird dadadada as the guitar enters on the downstroke DUM

dum dum, DUM dum dum, and she can hear the singer breathing in, the space into which he will sing, *My latest sun is sinking fast, my race is nearly run.*

To a pedestrian crossing the South Street Bridge in Philadelphia, Kendra looks like any other biking commuter, her ponytail crushed beneath her helmet, her hands clutching the tight straps of her JanSport backpack, her long legs on either side of the high top bar, the toes of her sneakers just touching the ground as she waits for the light to turn. But Kendra is thinking about walking down that hallway after her father with something like the anticipation she felt watching Carla Daniels reading on her bed those Friday nights, them both knowing what was still to come. It is this moment of walking, more than any other from the memory, that Kendra lingers over. She stops at it, presses rewind, re-plays it. She walks again down the hallway towards the muted music knowing that on the other side of the door will be people like her father playing the old songs, clear and present, that she and her father like to hear. The next lines would be the chorus *Oh come angel band, come and around me stand, oh bear me away on your snow white wings, to my immortal home* which would repeat and ruin all that was particular and open in the verse but they hadn't come yet. As the light turns green and Kendra stands, then presses down on the pedals, she is aware of her crotch making contact, again and again, with the seat of the bike.

The door opens. Inside, bright lights from fluorescent panels, a shiny gymnasium floor, a room too big for what it contains, the song goes on, it's tight, these people have played with each other before. A young woman in a purple shirt with chin-length black

hair on the upright bass, a thick man, mid-fifties maybe, wearing a Van Reenan's Repairs cap on rhythm guitar, a guy in a Hokies sweatshirt on banjo, and the mandolin player and singer, early forties, Hawaiian shirt, blond hair to the first button. They are on the inside. On the outside layer is an old man on backup guitar, a young boy holding a fiddle but not playing it, and two older women in twin sets. Dude walks around the group to where there is a pile of instrument cases next to a white collapsible table with a few bowls of chips and pretzels, a plate of cookies, a gallon of ginger ale, and a mason jar of corn liquor with strawberries floating at the bottom. Kendra follows. The mandolin player juts out his leg and the group does the chorus the last time around and then the mandolin player sets down his mandolin and hugs Dude to him.

"I wish I would have known Dude Mikesell was coming," the mandolin player says. "I would have made some more calls."

The bass player looks at Kendra then, and Kendra's face floods with hot blood as she thinks of how openly she stared down at this woman from the truck.

"You're too kind," Dude says, "entirely too kind. It's our pleasure to be here. This is my daughter. This is Kendra."

The guy in the Hokies sweatshirt gets up from his chair.

"No, no," says Dude, but he is already relaxing his legs to sit. Hokie insists, pulling up a new chair in the back. Dude sits and checks the banjo's tuning.

"Good," he says to Kendra.

The mandolin player suggests a song, not one of the true classics, but a safe choice just the same.

“What key?” Dude wants to know. He reaches into his jeans for his capo, jingling coins.

“A,” the mandolin player says, and Dude puts the capo on.

And they play. Kendra leans against the snack table and watches Dude get ready for his break, watches him thinking about what licks he will do. When the bass player calls out for a banjo break, Dude is prepared. Kendra watches Dude’s fingers, and she picks along in the air, one beat behind.

When they stop for drinks, Dude takes the bass player under his arm.

“Kendra,” Dude says, waving her over. “Lana.”

Lana grabs Kendra’s hand and drags her arm side to side. Kendra looks at Lana’s eyes, does not let her gaze lower to the purple shirt with its nice V and shapely breasts which are pale and slightly freckled.

“Lana goes to Vanderbilt,” Dude says. “She was my student at Tree Gap last year.” Then, to Lana, “We had some fun.”

“We did,” Lana says.

“You’re doing that thing again where you pull the string straight on,” Dude says. “Use the side of your finger. It’ll hurt less.”

“You’re right, Mr. Mikesell,” Lana says, putting her hand out so Dude can demonstrate on it. “I know,” she says, “I know.”

The mandolin player calls for Dude, wagging the jar of liquor. “I can’t,” Dude says, miming driving the big wheel of the truck as he crosses the room, and the mandolin player stomps his foot, saying, “Doesn’t make any sense,” and Dude is saying, “Yeah, but it makes cents,” and rubbing his thumb against the rest of his fingers.

“So you’re in what, twelfth grade?” Lana says. She smoothes a fat tendril of thick black hair behind her ear.

“Tenth.”

“How about after?”

“I don’t know. Play music maybe.”

“That’s nice,” Lana says. “But what else do you like to do? Anything else?”

“Not really,” Kendra says.

“I’ve been to Viney once,” Lana says. “In the summer, for Tree Gap, like your dad said. It’s pretty there. That was a good summer,” Lana says. “A lonely summer, but a good summer.” Her voice is packed with something, and she’s quiet, like Kendra should know what she means. “You planning to stay there after you graduate?”

“Sure,” Kendra says. “Why not?”

Lana smiles, then doesn’t. “Dude Mikesell’s daughter,” she says. “Didn’t know him to have one.” Lana’s hand disappears into the pretzels. She puts a handful into her mouth and chews them dryly, then sips from her red plastic cup. “You won’t be there,” Lana says finally. “Not in fifty years. Not in ten. I’d bet my bass on it.”

“What kind of a thing is that to say?” Kendra says. “That’s a shitty thing to say.”

Lana’s eyes are small and she blinks them more than most people. She brings the hand not holding her drink to her hip and dips her pretty shoulder.

“I have people,” Kendra says finally. “If you must know, I’m not lonely.” She pauses, deciding. “I have someone.”

Lana clicks her tongue like a gun cocking. “My mistake,” she says, and then she’s gone, clinking her cup against Dude’s and speaking loudly of other things.

“How about Kendra playing one?” the mandolin player says, once they’re all settled back into their chairs.

“Absolutely,” Dude says, already taking the banjo around his shoulders and motioning Kendra forward. “Here,” he says, giving it to her. “Sit.”

Kendra calls the song she played in the truck. “You sing too,” she says to Dude. Kendra begins, playing a simple kickoff. The mandolin comes in, then the guitar; last is Lana, following reluctantly, a little too slow, but when she gets it right, there is the song, in the heavy up and down thunk of the bass, and Kendra and Dude sing it.

In the parking lot, they follow Lana to her red hybrid.

“Don’t be silly,” Lana says, “it’s raining and I’m headed that way.” The car is showroom shiny, sitting centimeters from the ground with a nose round like a space shuttle. Even sitting in the lot, it gives the impression of forward motion.

“What a car, what a car!” Dude says, putting a hand on the little jutting trunk.

“Would you like to drive it, Dude?” Lana says, but he is already opening the driver’s door.

Kendra is squashed in the back with Lana’s books and the bass. Lana leans across the console and depresses a big silver button, and the dash lights up without a sound.

“Is it on?” Dude asks. Lana laughs, then turns around to look at Kendra, who does not laugh. Dude looks at the displays for some time, then takes hold of the wheel. He adjusts the seat back towards Kendra’s knees. Dude puts the car in gear and jerks forward into the city.

They drive in silence, rain thrums on the little roof of the car and the raindrops are so close, the inside of the car so tight and snug, and Kendra's eyes so heavy and dry.

Dude stops at a light, and they sit at an intersection just before a freeway entrance ramp.

"I'm happy," Dude says, the wipers going. He rests his right hand on the car's automatic gear shift. "I'm happy today."

"That's good," Lana says. She cuffs his wrist with her whole hand. Her nails are long and shiny with clear polish. "It's good to be happy," she says.

"I know," Dude says. "But I keep forgetting."

Back in the truck, Dude says, "So. We had fun. But we're behind now, and the weather's only going to get worse. Must put pedal to metal. Take the sleeper," he says. "Your mother will kill me if I keep you up all night."

Kendra tries to sleep, and half succeeds. She thinks of weight and pounds, pounds and weight, how Carla Daniels is shrinking, 104 pounds, 98 pounds. Kendra is running in the woods, away from Carla Daniels. Carla is trying to climb aboard Kendra's back, she wants a piggy back ride. Carry me, Carla says. Please. She's doe-eyed, suggestive as the bass player. There is Carla's little body, her rounded shoulders, the way she looks on top of Kendra, Kendra not sure if she is going to cry or punch or come, she can never tell what Carla will do until after she has done it and sometimes not even then, can never tell if Carla sees the pile of doors by the shed or not, when she guns the four wheeler towards them she leans her body into the crash, keeps her eyes open as she crashes; Carla gets up, dusts herself off, turns to the side, sucking in her stomach in jean shorts, she disappears, she's so thin, she laughs, she doubles over, Carla's head is upside

down, her white-blond hair spreading over her grey flannel sheets, Carla's forehead and nose covered by the sheet, eyes drawn on her upside down chin in sharpie, mouth singing, *My baloney has a first name, it's O-S-C-A-R, my baloney has a second name,* Kendra pulling the sheet off and making a tent over Carla, rolling Carla up, a babushka, a burrito, Carla rolling off the bed onto the floor, Carla laughing and laughing.

Kendra wakes up rolling, she rolls off the bed and slams face first into the hard cooler. When she lifts her head they're on a steep downhill stretch.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," Dude says, "I tried to ride that curve out but had to throw the brake to take it. You ok?"

Kendra nods, crawls her way up to the passenger seat. The truck slows then accelerates again, jerking forward as it starts an uphill grade.

The sound comes first. It is like the sound a wine bottle makes when it rolls slowly towards the edge of a table, except louder, much louder. Kendra can hear the revolutions, the same piece of surface hitting new ground again and again, and then she sees it in the side window. The coil unfurls as it rolls, leaving behind a thin layer of receding metal and then there is a moment of terrible hovering when the coil makes no more rolling sound but is still visible, it is still, if only technically, *on* the flatbed, and then it drops from sight and there is a boom so loud, so compact and total, it does not linger, it is boom then over, but fills the cab like a physical thing; Kendra can feel the windows and windshield of the cab wobble in their sockets, and then the road is veering off to the right and the median is coming up and slowing, the truck slows, then stops, and Dude is out of the truck, his door banging against the cab but not latching closed.

It's sleeting when Kendra puts her feet on the road, the day is beginning across the two opposite lanes of road going North. There are no headlights coming on their side, that is one good thing about it. Kendra walks, passing the place where the coil fell, smashing in the blacktop and freeing a big chunk of road down to the rebar. Kendra wobbles it with her foot. There are pieces of the layer that broke off in both lanes and along the left hand shoulder. The coil sits nestled in the middle of the median at the lowest point in its dip, a few revolutions of sheet steel unwound and crushed beneath it.

Dude is clearing the lanes, tossing the broken bits down into the median. Kendra does the same.

"Don't help me!" Dude yells. "You'll get yourself killed."

Kendra goes back to the truck, looks around in the cabinet over the sleeper bed until she finds flares. As she walks back, she hears Dude speaking into his cell phone. Kendra strikes the red stick against its cap, making flame.

"I'm done," Dude says into the phone. "I'm so done, I need a new word for it."

He climbs up onto the flatbed, and takes the end of one of the nylon straps into his hand. It is still secured to the trailer at a point close to the cab, the other end is ripped where it held the coil. "They said, Take chains, in Richmond," Dude says. "But they seemed weaker to me. All those links, so many places to fail."

"It just happened," Kendra says. "It will be OK."

"It won't," Dude says. "Your mother," he says, when they get back into the cab. "I've had a lot of jobs, and I was bad at all of them." When the sleet hits the windshield it breaks into icy granules. "I don't want to work anymore. Working isn't what I want to

do,” Dude says. He puts his cell phone on the console between them. “The company gave me this phone, and I liked having it. It made it easier to call you.”

In the passenger side window, the flares are weaker now, more pink than red. “I can do this one thing,” Dude says, to no one in particular. “Your mom wanted me to talk to you about Carla,” he says then. “She wanted me to tell you that you don’t want to walk the way Carla is going.”

“What way is that?” Kendra wants to know.

“Down.”

The phone between them is dark and smudged from where Dude’s thumbs were.

“Walk some other way,” Dude says. “Can you do that?”

“No,” Kendra says.

“Try.”

So Kendra tries. But it takes six years. On Mr. Ansel’s bus, the number three, Kendra watches Carla’s head bang against the glass of the bus window as she sleeps through the hour and a half drive from their mountain to the high school. In parenting class, Kendra hands Carla a plastic baby from the clear crate of babies; she is the only one who does not laugh when Carla throws it across the room, hitting her assigned partner, Randy, in the head as he is tightening the laces on his hunting boots. Carla still calls, and sometimes they still kiss and hold each other. Sometimes more—once, in Kendra’s pickup at a party on the creek after graduation, and again two years later when Carla discovers tequila. Dude sells his truck and uses the money to buy a small hatchback. No one knows where he goes. Festivals maybe—he has a loose band he tours

with—but Kendra never knows for sure where he is unless he calls from a pay phone. Kendra’s mom no longer talks to Nina Daniels on the phone, she finds God a better listener. When Carla’s senior portraits arrive in the mail, the same photo in triplicates, Kendra takes one and sticks it into her lime green wallet and there it stays until she is persuaded at gunpoint in Philadelphia to give it up.

“She’s in bed,” Randy says, a cop now, on the Saturday afternoon when Kendra comes to their house to tell Carla she is leaving.

“Already?” Kendra asks.

“Still,” Randy says, and Kendra thinks she hears something like real tenderness in his voice. “Leaving?” he says, touching Kendra on the arm. “Well, Buena Suerte!” He has been listening to Spanish language tapes in his patrol car.

Carla is under the covers, reading a Joyce Carol Oates hardcover, and smoking her parents’ weed. “Didn’t you like it?” Kendra asks.

“I liked it fine,” Carla says. She waves the hardcover in the air as if they are discussing the book. She pushes her white-blonde hair back from her cheeks with her whole palm and looks out the window. “I liked it,” she says. “But so what?”

Kendra locks her bike outside the underground train station in Philadelphia’s business district and takes the stairs down to the coffee kiosk. She is filling a large white cup with Tanzanian Peaberry and asking men in identical suits and Bluetooth headsets, *Can I get something started for you, sir?* when the trucker’s term for hauling a coil eye-to-the-side comes back again.

Suicide-loaded. Kendra wants to say the words out loud and for someone in Philadelphia to know what she means. She wants one person in this lovely and ridiculous city to hear how after the police came, and a small crane was towed in to remove the coil, and the sleet turned to snow, how much harder it was for Dude to drive the Freightliner back to West Virginia than it had been for him to drive it across Tennessee, now that the trailer was just a weightless piece of aluminum swaying and skidding across the wet road. She wonders if anyone would get it: how fatal a machine the truck had seemed to her then, without those pounds of tightly-wound steel, without any cargo at all, for it to carry.

HOW TO STAY

The government kept sending us girls. Their selection criteria seemed strange—if they thought West Virginia was so bad off, you’d think they’d send more than college girls in jean shorts—but we weren’t complaining. Amy didn’t particularly stand out except that she was older and just happened to be around during that shit time when I wore out the phone looking for work for our crew, gave up, and bam Chris Campbell and Drew Daniels left town within three months of each other, and bam my old best friend RC Buckley’s dad calls wanting us to build him a cabin in their back field, but by then there was only me and RC’s younger brother who does not count. Additionally, my crazy dad, who has been going by the name Barbara for years, finally decided to start ordering women’s hormones in the mail. They would arrive in appealing purple padded envelopes, but that is another story. Maybe one day I will write a book about it and make enough cash to shut this whole operation down, but that day is not today.

When Amy showed up, none of that had happened yet. She showed up in the fall, October, prime leaf tourism season, so when Drew and I got caught behind her flat silver hatchback with California plates moving at an embarrassing pace across the Viney Mountain straightaway, we thought she was just rubber necking on her way to the ski resort or some other more thrilling place.

California, Drew said.

California, I said.

I’d been there once, with my best friend RC Buckley, but I came back. We walked along Venice Beach, did a jig with a man dressed in a green reefer leaf costume and watched the surfers get clobbered and clobbered again by the Pacific Ocean. But

even in California I was as pessimistic as I've ever been. Even the hot dog buns were moist, filled up with something that tasted like sweat, but which was perhaps only salt water. I didn't like being a tourist, a walking wallet. I couldn't seem to give myself over to being gone.

Originally, there were five of us Viney Mountain Boys. To a certain way of thinking we were an unlikely crew. Drew Daniels and the Campbell brothers, Chris and older brother Danny, were commune kids, the sons of Philadelphia and Maryland people who came to Seneca County in the 1970s to drop out, whereas RC and I can visit our great-grandparents graves in the Bruffey's Creek cemetery. But Drew and RC are family, and we all lived along Cordova Road which starts and ends in blacktop but is dirt switchbacks in the middle. We all had power that would go out in a storm and we all rode Mr. Ansel's bus, the number three, an hour and a half each way. The only church our parents worshipped at was West by God Virginia. On Sundays, they worked in the raised beds, or cut wood.

On our first day of high school, they put the freshmen in the gymnasium. Mr. Arbogast, the welding teacher, took the stage.

What a stud! some bright boy called, and chugged his strawberry milk.

Hush up, Arbogast said. When you leave, you'll need what I know.

On the bus home that day, the five of us ended up in the back row and called bullshit. On a place where cheese-yellow foam popped through the blue vinyl bus seat, RC Buckley took a black sharpie and wrote, VINEY MOUNTAIN BOYS. After that, we wrote it under our desks at school, and scratched it with pocket knives into the wood

paneling of the Buckley pool table. We pissed it from kayaks, loopy and slow, aiming over floating coolers of melted ice and Old Milkwaukee, into the Three Forks River.

We wrote: VMBs 4EVER.

We didn't write: OR UNTIL IT GETS TOO HARD.

The day we met Amy, we were driving down to McCall's store to get something to eat and to put RC's name up on the bathroom wall. Danny Campbell was long gone to Florida, but RC was recent, and no one knew where. Chris and Drew and I drove three across on the bench seat of Drew's Tacoma down the mountain. Drew's hair was far too long, and greasy. He lived with a roommate and if they had an indoor shower, I never saw it.

Drew parked by the ice machine and did a circuit of the store to see what was fresh. He selected some eggs from the Mikesell's farm and a pouch of beef jerky hanging on the end of the canned goods wall. Drew had read all about the dangers of preservatives and he had announced that he wasn't eating anything that couldn't be found in caveman times.

The cave men had dehydrators? I said, but Drew had already popped the pouch, mmming.

Chris had no such hangups and was eyeing the puffy slices. The light from the pizza warmer turned the banana peppers neon.

Don't, Drew said, when he saw me reaching for the bathroom key.

It's been three months, I said. A rule's a rule.

I walked down the Hungry Man aisle to the bathroom where McCall kept the gallon jugs of water and the extra copies of Mrs. McCall's self-published life story, and also the Wall. The Viney Mountain Boys had one rule and one rule only: do not get your name written on McCall's Wall of the Gone.

Barbara says I should be more forgiving. People change, Barbara says, and what they want changes right along with them, or else for some people, being gone calls to them in such a way that they can't not answer.

I took the sharpie from above the medicine cabinet, and wrote RC's name in a spot near the bottom right corner. Next to Danny Campbell (Florida, pizza delivery boy) I wrote, RC Buckley (Mystery). The plywood wall was getting crowded. The girls I went to school with were taking up all the space, every girl who'd ridden Mr. Ansel's bus was here. They'd sat in the front and read plastic-covered library books about Monet or Liberia or how the stock market works.

When I came out, there was Chris and Drew talking to a girl by the ice machine.

Amy was like her hatchback: broad in an athletic kind of way and flat as a board from the side. Her hair was blonde but barely, and pulled back in a nub. Her shirt hung on her and showed the shape of her pointy little breasts, which did not look to be encased in a bra, and she had a bandana knotted around her neck like she was the Lone Ranger.

When she showed up later that night for Friday pool night, I blamed Drew.

What? he said, as he hooked up his truck to the generator and flipped the switch. But he knew what. He was always taking people in. There had been the guy from Brown University who was doing the documentary about RC's dad, called *Don Buckley*:

Paterfamilias of West Virginia Bluegrass. But he was annoying, dredging up phrases no one had ever said, not even in British olden times, like *kind sir* or always wanting to know the *traditional Seneca County way* to do things. One time Chris got drunk and spiked a can of Old Milwaukee against the guy's skull.

There's your tradition, Chris said.

Your road! Amy shouted when she strolled in. I think my insides are scrambled.

Her voice seemed too big for the pool shed. She laughed loud then, a phony laugh, her mouth wide open so I could see her gums and the back of her throat. Despite the chill she wore a soft-looking orange skirt. She sat down in the old barber's chair and stretched out her legs which were hairy but sun-bleached.

Very cool, Amy said, looking at the oversized pool table. This your place?

No, I said. Our friend RC. His family's house is up the hill there.

Where is he? Amy wanted to know.

He is unavailable at the moment, Drew said.

He's gone, I said.

We drank Old Milwaukee and when that ran out, Natural Light, and when that ran out, ginger ale and some Old Crow that a girl had left in my car. Somewhere around midnight, during a particularly poky pool game between Drew and Chris, Amy and I were taking turns launching a ring we'd hung on a string from the ceiling towards a nail on the opposite wall when it hit me that Amy would love me. She wanted to know if I was an only child, and I told her I was. She wanted to know if I had ever left West Virginia, so I told her stories about family trips to North Carolina and Ohio. I told her

things, but I didn't get the usual pleasure out of making her want them. Soon, I was telling her other things.

I went to California once, I said.

Did you! she said. She was in prime form now, ready to connect across our differences and save me. But that was it, she didn't push. She didn't want to know, as the other girls had, if I'd gone to college or even finished high school. I asked her no questions, made no claims. But she wanted to talk. She had travelled to Ireland and India and Brazil. She told me what college was like. She had a four-year degree from Berkeley and had done a Masters in Botany afterwards. She was older than me, but not much. She was in Seneca County to talk to farmers.

Local foods, she said. Farmer's market.

My family has a farm, I said, like a moron. I took a sip from my glass and let my tongue soak in the whiskey. I was drunk, but not very.

I know, she said. I talked to someone at your place already. Barbara?

Yeah, I said. We do lettuce, a few other vegetables.

She used her hands a lot when she talked, and threw them out now, in excitement. She spilled beer on her sweater, and used her sleeve to mop it up.

Later, we were outside leaning against the shed. Across the field on the ridge line, I could see the light on in the Buckley music room. The cicadas were going.

I'd like to kiss you, Amy said. But I swore.

Swore what? I said. Swore how?

In a ballroom in the Hilton Hotel Philadelphia, Amy said. They had us raise our right hands and swear. They said repeat after me. She raised her right hand. Let's see,

she said, and spoke with fake pomp: *I will get things done for America, to make our people safer, smarter, healthier. Faced with apathy, I will take action. Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground. Faced with adversity, I will persevere.*

I didn't hear anything about kissing, I said, lifting the nub of her hair and putting my mouth on what was underneath. Her forehead shone.

Touch me here, she said, running my hand under her skirt and along the part of her underwear that was just a string. Touch me again, she said.

In the morning, at home, Barbara was in jeans and a purple sweatshirt, leaning into the kitchen counter and smoking.

You hungry? Barbara asked, pushing back a hank of long grey hair with the hand that was holding the cigarette. There's eggs and coffee.

Coffee, I said, and Barbara poured a mug from the stovetop percolator. Barbara read a book about medicinal plants and watered the cacti. One had gotten so tall that it was hitting up against the ceiling and flopping over, so Barbara cut off the end and re-planted it. On a clear day, we can get public radio out of Roanoke for a few hours, so I listened to people imitating the sounds their cars made when things go wrong inside. Later, I stood next to the sink and dried the dishes Barbara handed me. Barbara drained the sink, put on a plaid wool coat, and picked up two heavy rocks. They were dry now and wrapped in newspaper, but when I'd stood on the rocky shore and pulled them out of the river they'd been alive and gleaming.

These will work, Barbara said. Thanks.

You got it, I said.

Barbara was building a wall out back but needed me to get the stones. Barbara says we have a five-oh five-oh division of labor. We work the gardens together. If a fence needs fixing, I fix it. If one of the cars breaks down, Barbara does. Barbara packs the lettuce and vegetables we grow into delivery bags, and I load them into my station wagon with the broken muffler and do the deliveries. Barbara used to do a five-oh share of the deliveries too, until a new chef at the River Grill in Viney squinted and said, Bobby? Bobby? You in there?

On the top right corner of the wall of the gone is written BOBBY EVANS (Land of the Freaks). That has been there a long time.

I'll be outside, Barbara said. If you need me.

Sometimes Amy and I went a long time without seeing each other. We never talked on the phone. She worked late almost every day, and I often drove by her little house right off the state road in an aimless kind of way, only to find it dark. But when we saw each other, it was good. She came by the farm and sat with me and Barbara. The three of us smoked and talked and cooked. We made venison soaked in red wine, sliced potatoes baked in olive oil and sea salt, peach cobbler, salads with special hydroponic lettuce Barbara was trying out with raspberries and goat cheese. Amy leant Barbara a book from a gender studies class she took in college, and Barbara leant Amy the book about medicinal plants. They disappeared, carrying plates into the kitchen, talking in words I didn't understand, and shooing me away when I offered to dry.

I took Amy up the logging road and into the woods around our property, showed her what a ginseng plant looks like above ground, and how to leave enough so it will

grow back. Barbara used to take me ginsenging on the weekends. Once, we ran into a red Chevy, idling in a clearing. We walked on by, raising a hand, but the guy called out. He was lonely and wanted to shoot the shit. He asked what we were doing and Barbara told him. The dogs were stretching their necks as far as they could through the holes in their plywood box, whining to be let out. The bear hunter looked at Barbara's long hair and purple parka and cloth tote bag for the ginseng, and then looked at me, like *And you?* When we got back to the house, my mom was waiting for us in the mud room. She had a real estate job in town, she said, and a two bedroom apartment for me and her.

No, I said.

She kicked the floor again and again with her snow boot. She was wearing a purple parka that matched Barbara's.

Have it your way, she said to Barbara. But if John's gonna live with you, you could at least wait until he's finished high school to have your fun.

It's not for fun that I'm doing this, Barbara said. It's not any fun at all.

That mountain, Amy said, pointing across the big view. It looks like a pregnant woman. I agreed. We sunned ourselves on the rocks, and I helped her run lines for her part in the county play. We looked up and saw nothing but sky. We laughed. We laughed a lot.

But then it was winter and all the Viney Mountain Boys that were left were broke. It seemed no one wanted a fence built or a roof patched in January. And then we were at pool night and bam, I got that salty watery taste in your mouth that you keep trying to

swallow down right before you throw up, which I have since come to know happens every time a VMB decides to let their name go up on the wall.

Chris Campbell pointed to his Bronco which we painted sky blue the year before.

If I could see that color for just one second, he said. But he doesn't finish the sentence.

Don't, I said.

Oh give it a rest, Chris said. In Denver, it's sunny three hundred days a year.

We had a rule, I said.

That was years ago, Drew said.

Chris sat in the barber's chair and made a scepter out of beer cans and duct tape. Drew played both sides of pool by himself. He sat on the table and shot from behind his back. The balls clacked together nicely and fell into the pocket.

Spring came all of a sudden. One morning I woke up and put on my wool long johns and my lined work pants and my boots and went outside to roll a cigarette and I was hot. Suddenly the mountain tops were brown instead of white. It rained for days and the library flooded and the senior center and the Dairy Queen. I went over to Drew's house to help him and his roommate clean up all the water. We put newspapers and clothes into trash bags and took them to the dump on Caesar Mountain, and I rode in the back of Drew's truck facing front to keep the bags from blowing away. We were driving behind a pick up that was pulling a trailer full of hay. It was still raining. The sky was huge and grey and the town was below us, empty too, and as we went, I watched how the trailer swerved all over the road even though the truck was driving smooth and straight.

Pieces of hay were falling off the trailer and flying away and hitting me in the eyes. Drew was looking at the road, and also not. He had one of his hands draped over the wheel at the wrist, casual, as if thinking of something else than what we were doing.

When the bad taste rose up in my mouth, I rapped on the dividing pane and Drew slid it open. I'm gonna be sick, I said.

Go ahead and be sick then, he said, and pulled over on the shoulder.

One Friday in June, Amy called and asked me to go with her to look at a truck she was thinking about buying. I told her I had to work, Don Buckley had also called by then and I was back in business working on his cabin, but when RC's brother took the day off to float the river with the rest of his band, I decided what the hey. While Amy drove, I smoked a bowl and hung my arm out the window. The sun felt good, I was in a good mood, and cows muscled each other for a spot in the shade. We switchbacked up the mountain, then made the sharp turn onto the blacktop headed towards town.

My mom is sick, Amy said. They thought she was fine, but she's not anymore. I have to go back to California.

I knew what I was supposed to say. I knew there were questions I was supposed to ask. They floated like balloons in the car, but I didn't grab for any of them.

What happened to *faced with adversity, I will persevere*? I said.

Those are just words, Amy said. This is my mom.

So you'll go, I said. And not come back.

Of course I'm coming back, Amy said. Why would I need a truck in California?

There was so much distance between Amy and me you could have counted the miles. I did as they ticked by in silence on the odometer. After six miles I put my hand on her knee. After two more, I took it away again.

She turned the car down the state park road and then we stopped. The truck was a black Ranger with tires that still had most of their tread. It wasn't new but it had been washed and waxed and had a snazzy yellow racing stripe. The man selling it opened the cab and motioned for me to get in, but Amy did instead. She put her hands on the wheel, lowered the sun visor, turned the radio on and listened to the static, started the engine then cut it off. The man popped the hood. I looked underneath and there was some rust but not too much.

Do you want to know what I think? I said.

I don't think so, Amy said to the man.

It's a good truck, I said.

I'll pass, she said.

On the way home in her hatchback, we didn't laugh at all. I took her hand in mine and held it. I could feel each individual finger pressed against my skin. I could feel my skin press back. I could feel the war that was between us.

Later, I was sitting at home with Barbara, eating pudding and talking about Barbara's new theory.

The U.S. government knows everything we do on our computers, Barbara said.

Come on, I said. Barbara is always keeping clippings on our fridge about new evidence proving the CIA killed Kennedy or how traditional dentistry is just swindling, along with letters from people in far away places who share these opinions.

It's true, Barbara said. That's why I stay right here where no one knows what I'm up to. Barbara opened some bills, and then the newest purple padded envelope. Barbara's face was getting thinner, Barbara's upper arms were getting flabbier.

I heard the mud room door open then and met Amy by the boots. She was wearing big glasses that I had never seen before.

I lied, Amy said. She bounced her hands in the pockets of a light yellow cotton hoodie. My mom's fine, I lied.

What then?

I don't know how to stay in a place, she said. She sniffed then made a face, as if smelling something sour. If I did, I would. Here. But I don't.

What do you say to that? That I know what she means, that I know it is possible to use up a whole life just learning how to stay and that I am doing it.

Her glasses caught the overhead light so it was hard to see her eyes. I reached over and took them off. Her eyes looked small and wet.

Come in, I wanted to say, and have some pudding. That, or, take me with you.

You gonna put me on that wall? she said, but I couldn't tell how she meant it.

I said nothing. She took her glasses back and let herself out. It took her a long time to reverse.

The last time I talked to her was in McCall's. She was standing down one of the aisles looking at cereal like it was hard. We came towards each other, and said nothing special. The last time I saw her, she was on stage. She was wearing a red business suit and her hair pulled back. I didn't like the way she was talking, like she was trying to be funny, but I closed my eyes and listened. I got there late so I didn't understand the whole plot, but I understood she was accused of a crime. When I opened my eyes one of her knees in flesh-colored panty hose was wobbling as she spoke. She stood in front of the blond county commissioner who was playing her defense lawyer and love interest.

The night before the trial started I actually cried I wanted you so badly, he said.

I could see this line take her all the way down, even this millionth time. She needed these words, and now they had been said to her in front of our town.

I asked Barbara once: Why?

And she said, when we go towards the female, we go towards the place where joy lives.

I should have snuck out then, during the black out. But then the next scene was starting. I was afraid I had waited too long. I stayed to the last word. I stayed to see her hold hands with the fat girl playing her mother who had refused to take a shit in the high school bathroom. I stayed to see her and the county commissioner bow and smile to each other and him wave to his wife in the audience. I stayed to see her bow over, alone on the stage, awkwardly, her collar flaps coming unfolded like dog's ears.

It's three months later and I'm the only Viney Mountain Boy left, so what's the point I want to make about Amy? She was just another girl on her way to somewhere

else, and I didn't even go that deep into things with her. But she presents the first case of an interesting dilemma. What I haven't figured out yet is if you can be from a place that is not Viney, West Virginia, that is say, Oakland, California, and still get your name on McCall's Wall of the Gone. That is, do you count as gone, if first you had to come? The purists among us, Don Buckley for example, would say no. Barbara would say yes.

It still says RC BUCKLEY (Mystery). He's gone and no one knows where.

OK. I wrote BOBBY EVANS (Land of the Freaks) on the Wall of the Gone myself, because no one else would, and it's true.

I write Amy's name in the only space that's left on the plywood wall, a round spot near the bottom right corner. I swear, I can give her that much.

44 TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE

1.

At the Ethiopian restaurant on Baltimore Avenue, I can sit at the bar and not be bothered. On Sunday afternoons, I watch the owner and his wife and two children in the corner booth, eating the spongy flat *injera* bread with their hands. I stand at the electric jukebox and watch the trolleys slide by outside and pick songs that remind me of home. I wait as long as it takes for them to come on. I can wait for them all night.

2.

I live now in West Philadelphia, where the houses are jammed up against each other so close they share walls and the porches sit in a line you can look down. At home in Viney, everyone I knew grew up on Viney Mountain and everyone was white. Here, there are many black people who grew up here, and a few white people who didn't.

3.

Where I live now, I pretend I'm a vegetarian. The craigslist ad said: *vegetarian roommate wanted for communal house*. I buy meat anyway, in Styrofoam rectangles, and hide it in the back of the freezer behind the frozen broccoli.

4.

A young black man lives in the basement apartment below the Victorian house where I rent a room from the vegetarians. We are supposed to share the front porch with him, but mostly he sits on the side steps that lead down from the sidewalk to his door. When he

sits on his steps and I sit on the porch and the wind blows just right, I can smell his weed and hear him talking on the phone. He is a PhD student and his father is dying.

5.

Bonjour and welcome to Chez Lincoln! says Fred, my boss. I work at a coffee kiosk in an underground train station, serving people rushing to and from commuter trains and rich people who work in the glass office building that sits on top of the station.

Yes hello, says Five Shot Americano, a man in a sleek dark suit. I will have a venti Americano with five shots.

Excellent, certainly, coming right up, sir, says Fred in customer voice. But unfortunately here at Chez Lincoln we have only pequeños, medio, and grandes. What size is right for you?

Five shot Americano is already talking on his bluetooth headset. Fred rushes to the cup dispenser, pulls out one cup of each size, rushes back to the counter, and holds them up. Five shot Americano points to the largest one and Fred rushes off to make it.

Five shot Americano, says Fred to Lea so she can ring the guy up just in case she hasn't heard the conversation that went on right next to her.

Did you see Halladay just positively *demolish* the Padres? Fred is saying to Five Shot Americano as I come back out with milk. Fourteen strikeouts, I mean wow! but Five Shot Americano is already walking away.

OK guys, we really need to think about efficiency, says Fred. For example, put a cup under the coffee spout and then hand it off to someone else to put the lid on it.

All morning we run around and try to manage the line that never seems to get any

shorter no matter how much we haul ass. Men who are small or fat like to order the dark roast coffee that Fred has named Black Gold because it sounds manly. Guarding the espresso machine all morning, Fred repeats the Halladay story to every customer that is forced to listen to him while waiting for their drink.

At 10:00, Iced Dirty Chai comes and flirts with Lea on the register. Later in the morning, Medium Mocha comes by, a fat man in his early fifties who also gets a scone and sits on the side. I get his scone and put it on a plate and give him extra butter. He is not in a hurry. He is a composer with his own keyboard. He says he's been writing songs about giving it one more try. He asks me if I play any instruments, and I tell him I used to.

6.

I use the public train station bathroom, and when I come out of the stall there is a homeless woman in a long overcoat lining up all her shoes along the edge of the sinks. In my town, there was a man named Kurt who sat on the bench by the ice machine outside McCall's store and told Catholic jokes.

Which ones? the homeless woman asks me, and I stand there a long time, considering the shoes.

7.

A woman with kind eyes and a crew cut comes and orders a Large Black Gold and I feel like someone has jacked the lights up. She wears a blue blazer and a skinny tie and has nice shoes. She waits patiently in line between two men wearing suits the same color of

blue as hers. Who can say what attraction is made of. She carries a messenger bag with a seatbelt for a buckle.

8.

In the tenth grade, I slept at Carla Daniels' house every Friday night until her mother made us stop. There was a plastic lamppost in the Daniels' front yard that striped Carla's ribs when she sat on me on account of her wooden blinds. It was the light we had, and the blinds were how it got in. Her jean shorts were impossibly small, dark indigo denim with a flat metal button, and when I used my hand to turn it and lift the fabric around the button, she sucked her stomach in to help me. I was always hoping for more light. There was a lamp on her bedside, but I never turned it on. The slightest thing could spook her. If she noticed the stripes, it wasn't long before she was reaching up to turn the blinds. When she leaned away from me, the ends of her braids went dark.

9.

When Large Black Gold comes back for a refill around 2:00, she talks to me as I'm pouring the sugar from the box into the dispensers. She works in the glass office building above the train station, for a company that collects body parts for transplants. She's in charge of the livers. I ask her about her messenger bag with the seatbelt for a buckle, and she tells me she bikes to work.

That must be nice, I say.

It is, she says. And also harrowing. Bicyclists are the number one liver-givers.

10.

With the money from my first month at Chez Lincoln, I buy a cell phone, a squat squarish thing that slides forward to show a keyboard with tiny buttons when you push it with your thumbs.

11.

I sit around with the vegetarians and drink their home-brewed beer. They are all thin, all runners, all working for organizations with the word community in them. Two of them speak fluent Spanish.

How's your job? one of them asks me, and I can tell she pities me, and the question stinks, a smell like a horse hoof beginning to rot.

12.

I use my tiny phone to call Carla Daniels. I get the message saying the number isn't in service. I dial the number for my house, hold my breath, press the green *send* button. My sister's voice comes on, saying to leave a message for her or Mom, then a too-long silence, then the beep. I tell them I'm doing good, ask after them and the new horses Mom is training. Ask if they know anything about Carla Daniels. Maybe she moved? I'd like to write her, I say. I speak my new address out loud. Love you guys, I say. Then I hang up.

13.

I get a drink of water and stand over the sink. I feel all scraped out. But of what?

14.

I cook a small beef patty in an iron skillet that belongs to one of the vegetarians and eat it sitting in a lawn chair on the porch.

The black PhD student from the basement apartment comes around the corner and walks up the front steps with a book under his arm.

Oh, I say, startling.

I have just as much right to be here as you, he says. Then a little softer, That's my apartment down there.

Right, I say. Hello, I say. He takes a seat in another lawn chair a few feet away. He looks to be a little older than me, maybe twenty-five, and wears dark jeans and a red hoodie. He's reading a big book that looks brand new. He's struggling to hold it open and still smoke his cigar. I finish my patty in a few bites and get up to go.

Stay, he says. You're not bothering anyone. I sit back down. I listen to the sound of a police car getting closer and then farther away. A low-riding Lincoln town car goes by, with a shot muffler.

15.

In Viney, the boys threw glass into their mufflers to make that sound on purpose. The boy who got all the girls except me had a Subaru wagon with a shot muffler. We tried to fix it with weld puddy, but it still clanked.

16.

Large Black Gold is tall, possibly six foot. She comes around more and more, bringing a big blue glass mug for me to fill. One day, I pull a double shift, and she is waiting for me at six.

You need happy hour, she says, And you need it bad.

I don't argue. We go to a crowded bar in the fancy neighborhood around the train station.

I'm going to get you something good, she says, and puts her hand at the nape of my neck just below my ponytail.

17.

When you go underground, when you move, in a standard cab pickup truck, from your home on Viney Mountain to a place where no one knows anything about you, not one person, not one thing, when you really make a home for yourself there, alone, at the bar, it can be so good.

18.

At an Italian restaurant in an alley, Large Black Gold and I eat penne Bolognese with rosemary and heavy cream, and slices of mozzarella oozing fresh water and salt. Large Black Gold takes out bottle after bottle of wine from her messenger bag, and the waiter opens them and pours them beautifully. Oil runs down my chin and onto my napkin, and Large Black Gold laughs. There is tiramisu, Limoncello on the house. I thank and thank the waiter each time he refills our water glasses.

19.

When we fuck, my fingers smell like coffee and places I will never travel: Ethiopia, Costa Rica, Sumatra, Chiapas.

20.

Here, in this city where you can't see the sky, it goes from light to dark and back again in the strangest way.

21.

Large Black Gold drives me home, a classy touch. It rains and she plays good jazz. My knees are pushed up against the dashboard of her old black BMW. The music is full in the car and the windshield wipers hit back and forth, and there is the brassy sound of a cymbal being hit lightly, over and over again.

22.

In front of my house, I consider her face which looks straight ahead. I decide to tell her about the music. I tell her I used to play banjo, that I sing a little. Then I tell her that I left my banjo on Viney Mountain, following rules I made up, but now I'm sick without it. She looks at me, smiles, changes the radio station, and when I don't say anything else, she kisses me then sits back in her seat, waiting. I pull the door handle, put a foot on the asphalt, walk up the stairs to my door. But she doesn't drive away yet; she's making sure I get inside. Standing on my porch, with my key in the heavy wood door, looking at her wet black car in the tree-lined street, the simple fact comes to me, truer than true: this

woman, she has a name and it is Kim, she is, as my sister would say, going to fuck my shit up.

23.

Craig, says the PhD student holding out his hand. This time he is already on the porch when I get there.

Kendra, I say, taking his hand which smells like Old Spice and cigars.

You a friend of these girls? he says, gesturing to my house.

Not really, I say. He nods, looks back at his book. They're all vegetarians, I say.

I'm sorry, he says.

Me too, I say.

I was too, for too long.

Guilt? Religion?

Sort of. We were Rastas. Rastafarians? Well, my ex-wife still is. That's how I was raised, but not anymore.

What are you reading?

Madame Bovary. Ever read it?

Nope. You're a student?

Yeah. How'd you know?

Heard you on the phone.

Creepy. At least you're honest, he says. It's alright, I get to read a lot and teach and talk to people about ideas. He pauses, puffs on the cigar and lets out the smoke. I guess you heard me talking about my dad then, too?

Yeah.

He nods. He has cirrhosis of the liver. Do you know what that is?

Yes, I say.

Someone close to you?

Everyone.

There's a sound like a car backfiring, then the same sound again.

Gunshots, says Craig, and we listen. Come, he says. I'll fix you some breakfast.

The sun will be up soon.

I should get some sleep, I say.

I've got bacon, he says.

24.

Down in Craig's apartment, books explode from the laundry hamper, the kitchen cabinets, the floorboards. He turns on the olive-colored stove and heats up a cast iron pan.

As the bacon sizzles and the toast toasts, Craig tells me he has a seven-year-old son named Arnie who lives half the time with his ex-wife in their old house in North Philadelphia, where everyone on the block is Rasta.

Why did you move? I want to know.

I used to go with my ex and her mom when they went to get their dreads tightened, says Craig. I sat outside on the bench and read. The old guys on the corner would come over and talk to me about our people, about the revolution, about how empty and screwed up the rest of the world was. They told me it was good that I liked to read. They told me it was good I was smart. But the more I read, the more I didn't agree with

what people were saying at the meetings and on the corners. I wanted to know for myself what was so bad about everywhere else.

Craig puts two plates on the kitchen table. He pulls out a chair for me and I sit in it. He hands me a yellow cloth napkin and spreads his own over his big knees.

Where are you from anyway? he asks. I get ready to say it's name, get ready to say, Viney Mountain, West Virginia. I feel my whole self, down to the bone, spin around a thought that is caught in the center: this life that I have today, here in this city, alone, I will not survive it. Not one more year. Not one more day. Not one more minute.

My cheeks are wet.

Craig's watching me. He puts down his fork.

It's good bacon, but it's not *that* good, he says, smiling, and I laugh, and pick up a piece of bacon and swallow it, and then take another bite and then another, until there's nothing left on the plate but blue and white flowers.

25.

Fred's anecdote of the day is the story of a little girl in South Africa who had third degree burns over eighty percent of her body. The odds were bad, but her doctors used a kind of spray gun to re-grow her skin and save her life.

These are amazing times we live in, says Fred to Medium Mocha, When it's possible to create new skin.

26.

Kim's shoulder blades scraped against my cheek when she turned away, briefly, in sleep.

She grows there, in my throat.

27.

Kim is only ever free on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, and I spend Monday through Saturday afternoon holding my breath.

28.

I learn to hate my cell phone. Its small squarish screen blinks blankly at me. When I'm at home, I put it in a tin and put the tin under my bed.

29.

I start spending my afternoons after work with Craig. He reads me Willa Cather and Susan Sontag and Thomas Hardy, and I alphabetize his record collection. Then he smokes weed and reads by himself on his steps, but he lets me play any record of his I want to hear as many times as I want to hear it.

30.

I get the CDs from my truck and we go song for song, playing each other our essentials: my Stanley Brothers for his Bob Marley, my Bill Monroe for his Jimmy Cliff, my Del McCoury Band for his Peter Tosh.

31.

Craig's ex-wife drops off his son Arnie at his apartment one day while I am there. Arnie

wears a loose-fitting embroidered shirt made of heavy cloth over his blue jeans, and carries a big backpack. The ex-wife is a short woman with dreadlocks down to her shins.

You ever have locks as long as that? I ask Craig.

Just about, he says.

Arnie tells me he wants to be a city planner. On a slab of asphalt that juts sharply up out of the sidewalk, Arnie builds a city of cement chunks he's picked up around our block. He's divided the pieces by size and put all the big ones in one pile and the small ones in another. Between them he's smeared blue Crest toothpaste.

It's a river, he says.

I see that, I say. Where's the bridge?

No bridge, says Arnie, munching on a Cheez-It. They have to stay on the side they're on.

32.

I buy a bike at a porch sale and clamber awkwardly on top so Kim and I can ride together along the Schuylkill. We go over the bridge that separates West Philadelphia from the rest of the city and she asks me if I see, in the distance, five small boys standing at the river's edge. I say I don't so she'll stop peddling and put her arm around me and point.

33.

A letter arrives from my mother, but when I open it, all it says is: *Haven't seen Carla in some while, but Drew Daniels left the mountain, joined the Peace Corps? Maybe he knows.* Carla's twin brother's email address is written in sharpie at the bottom of the

page.

34.

I email Drew Daniels. I tell him I think it's tricky, this business of moving away from home. I tell him I get confused, that reasons I left keep becoming reasons I could have stayed. For example, I say, your sister. So I ask him. I lay it all out. I say, Please. I say, can you tell me one thing you know for sure about being gone?

35.

The space where Kim lives in my body has settled down and expanded. It's moved from my throat and lives now somewhere just behind my sternum. There are other things stored there, and they're jostling each other. Carla Daniels is in there. The boy with the broken muffler, is in there. Also, the moment when you're sitting in a circle with friends about to play music.

36.

When Saturday night comes, I look for clues in Kim's apartment. It's clean. Brightly colored walls with nothing on them. We sit in her living room, watching an old Western on TV, and she puts her hand in my crotch. She touches everything there, and the blood won't stop flooding my body. I picture the curlicue f shape of the sound holes on a mandolin. She finds where one kind of skin stops and another kind begins. She tells me how I give myself away, easy as a book. I breathe out, all that weight. I feel something, way down in my gut. Not like sex. The word I would use is comfort.

37.

Osama Bin Laden is found and killed. Fred tells customers lines from last night's Letterman, the theme being what Bin Laden might have said just before he died. Fred's favorite is: I need a house full of Navy SEALs like I need a hole in the head. He tells this to Kim as she's waiting for her espresso. She laughs.

38.

Kim calls on a Tuesday night, late, and asks to come over. The vegetarians are already in their beds and are too-polite cranky when woken. I sneak her up the old wooden steps of my house, the sound traveling through every floorboard. She takes her contacts out in the big tiled bathroom and looks at me, blinking, in her socks.

39.

There is the way Philadelphia looks sometimes, when I'm biking home late at night across the bridge. Below me, on I-76, cars rush east to the city and west to the mountains. The lights of big office buildings on the water. There is the way all that light feels good on my eyeballs and in my body. I can get to thinking: this big gorgeous city, this is where I live now, this is where I live.

40.

Drew Daniels writes back. He tells me it rains more in Cameroon than it ever did in West Virginia, but that the sky can go from sunny to pouring in ten seconds flat in a way

that reminds him. Carla is gone, he says. Not gone gone. Her name will never go up on McCall's wall, for example, but she's not there just the same.

Here, he says, is your true thing. Every day, in the village where I am stationed with the Peace Corps, I climb the Moabi tree in my front yard. I climb the tree to the top. I sit and pray to God. I pray that I will fall out of the tree and break something or hurt myself so badly that they will have to send me back to my mom's house on Viney Mountain. Then, I climb back down.

41.

I don't actually live here, says Kim, over a nightcap in her apartment.

In this apartment?

In Philadelphia, she says.

I know, I say. She knocks back the two fingers of Knob Creek and goes to sit on the window sill. Where *do* you live? I want to know.

A little bit of everywhere, she says. Phoenix, Albuquerque, San Francisco, Madison. I go wherever the livers go.

Next you'll tell me you have a girl in every port? A wife and kid?

Not the kid part, she says quietly. We let that one sink into the air a while.

Why did you call then? I say. What am I doing here?

I don't know, she says. I guess, I didn't expect you to matter.

Because I work in a train station? Because I'm from a hick town?

Because I'm married, she says. And when you're married, no one else is supposed to matter, and I go and get my coat.

She walks me to the train station, but on the way we cut down a cobblestone alley where people are waiting in line. The alley's pulsing. I can feel Kim hesitating as we pass, and in a few more steps she stops completely.

I know things are fucked, she says, but do you want to dance? I say sure because there's more to be said and we haven't said it yet. I follow her down the long velvet-rope hallway and through one set of doors where the music's quiet, then another where the music's louder, then into a huge room filled with pink light. I take it in like a 360 degree windstorm; the great white bulb above our heads that is shaped like a hot air balloon, the balcony that wraps all the way around the room, the electronic music that seems to come from the hot air balloon, the people every way I turn, and nowhere to put my feet. Kim takes my hand and pulls me toward the bar, and for the first time, as we pass by couples making out and men in suspenders jolting their knees in place, I notice that she is shorter than me. At the bar, it's so loud we can't talk, which is perfect, so I just let her buy me round after round and we stare out at the crowd. We switch to drinking shots. The room goes from mainly looking pink to mainly looking orange. Zebra spots and spinning stars are projected on the hot air balloon. The music changes to something with more of a beat.

I love this song, Kim yells in my ear. I smile, but I just lean there. I don't owe her anything now. She starts flopping her arms, dancing on her own. I start doing what I think is dancing. We do the robot. She grabs a hold of her ankle. We laugh.

Two girls come on stage, one singing into a rotary phone, the other on electric guitar. The singer's face is pale and a little fat. Splotches of pink, rash-like, sit high in her cheeks. My teeth bite into the thick shot glass. We get crowded into a corner, against a

big speaker. We stay there, in the static.

42.

This is what she was to me: for once, we could not hide behind our hair, could not hide from each other in the woods after the leaves fell, after Carla found the rotted tool shed and pretended to be going to Walden, how we walked along the logging road in hiking boots and looked down at the boots of the other thinking, these boots could be the boots of my wife, how I looked down at my own boots and thought, I could have a wife.

43.

The girl is still singing into the rotary phone. She keeps perfectly still as everything else in the room moves around her. We look for any way up, and a man with arms covered in lions pulls us there, onto a kind of platform. We stomp on the floor like a last ditch line dance. The girl singers' flesh jiggles in the bright light. Kim gets down on her knees in front of me.

What are you doing? I yell at her, looking down at this woman who can't give me any piece of what it is I need. And then I get on my knees too. It's called closing your eyes. It's called music. It's called giving of your whole heart. And I think: this is how I will come to know people from now on, in cavernous rooms flooded with light.

44.

When I get home, Craig is smoking a cigar on the porch and reclining on a blue corduroy couch he's dragged out here. I'm drunk so I tell him everything about Kim, and he is too,

so he tells me about his father who is now not dying, but dead, and his ex-wife who says that him turning his back on their lifestyle is one of life's few unforgivable things.

I ask him if he wants to go to the Ethiopian restaurant and sit at the bar.

It's closed now, he says. Too late. But there is another. I and I will go sometime.

What? I say, yawning.

He stops, puts a hand across his mouth, rubs his beard. It's an old Rasta thing, he says. You don't say you and me. I and I is what you say when you're talking to other people in the cause, other exiles. It means we're alone together.

I don't ask him if I can drive him to the funeral and he doesn't ask me if he can make me breakfast, but we understand the other is offering and also saying yes.

Craig lights another cigar and I take off my coat.

Down the block, a car backfires twice, then once more.

We sit there for a long time. We sit there until we can't hear any sound coming from the street. We sit there until it's not pitch-black night anymore, but blue-black dawn.

Then, we get up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Jane Alison, John Casey, Scott Spencer, and Ann Beattie; I'm very grateful for your wisdom and the ways in which you challenged me to dismantle my own writing and also to trust it; and more broadly for the support of the University of Virginia MFA program. Thank you to my fellow fiction students whose lives mine was lucky enough to cross and whose words and fellowship I will miss for many moons. Many many thanks to Chris Tilghman for your encouragement that this work should see some light of day, your willingness to speak when things are wandering in the woods, and the kind illumination and best hopes you shed on these stories each week.

I am grateful always and grateful here for my own team of life—my parents, my sister, Stephanie Brooks, Chelsea Alsofrom, Lindsay Mollineaux, Sarah Riley. Thank you.